LAND AT LAST.

A NOVEL

BY

EDMUND YATES.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1866.

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LAND AT LAST.

BOOK THE SECOND.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Ampthill's Will.

The acquaintance between Margaret and Annie, which commenced so auspiciously, scarcely ripened into intimacy. When Lady Beauport's neuralgia passed away, — and her convalescence was much hurried by the near approach of a specially-grand entertainment given in honour of certain Serene Transparencies then visiting London, — she found that she could not spare Miss Maurice to go so long a distance, to be absent from her and her work for such a length of time. As to calling at Elm Lodge in person, Lady Beauport never gave the project another thought. With the neuralgia had passed away her desire to see that "pretty young person," Mrs. Geoffrey Ludlow; and in sending her card by

Annie, Lady Beauport thought she had more than fulfilled any promises and vows of politeness which might have been made by her son in her name.

Lord Caterham had driven out once to Elm Lodge with Annie, and had been introduced to Margaret, whom he admired very much, but about whom he shook his head alarmingly when he and Annie were driving towards home. "That's an unhappy woman!" he said; "an unhappy woman, with something on her mind — something which she does not give way to and groan about, but against which she frets and fights and struggles with as with a chain. When she's not spoken to, when she's not supposed to be *en évidence*, there's a strange, half-weary, half-savage gleam in those wondrous eyes, such as I have noticed only once before, and then among the patients of a lunatic asylum. There's evidently something strange in the history of that marriage. Did you notice Ludlow's devotion to her, how he watched her every movement? Did you see what hard work it was for her to keep up with the conversation, not from want of power, — for, from one or two things she said, I should imagine her to be a naturally clever as well as an educated woman, — but from want of will? How utterly worn and wearied and *distraite* she looked, standing by us in Ludlow's studio, while we talked about his pictures, and how she only seemed to rouse into life when I compared that Brighton Esplanade with the Drive in the Park, and talked about some of the frequenters of each. She listened to all the fashionable nonsense as eagerly as any country miss, and yet —— She's a strange

study, that woman, Annie. I shall take an early opportunity of driving out to see her again; but I'm glad that the distance will prevent her being very intimate with you."

The opportunity of repeating his visit did not, however, speedily occur. The fierce neuralgic headaches from which Lord Caterham suffered had become much more frequent of late, and worse in their effect. After hours of actual torture unable to raise his head or scarcely to lift his eyes, he would fall into a state of prostration, which lasted two or three days. In this state he would be dressed by his servant and carried to his sofa, where he would lie with half-closed eyes dreaming the time away, comparatively happy in being free from pain, quite happy if, as frequently happened, on looking up he saw Annie Maurice moving noiselessly about the room dusting his books, arranging his desk, bringing fresh flowers for his glasses. Looking round at him from time to time, and finding he had noticed her presence, she would lay her finger on her lip enjoining silence, and then refresh his burning forehead and hands with eau-de-cologne, turn and smooth his pillows, and wheel his sofa to a cooler position. On the second day after an attack she would read to him for hours in her clear musical voice from his favourite authors; or, if she found him able to bear it, would sit down at the cabinet-piano, which he had bought expressly for her, and sing to him the songs he loved so well — quiet English ballads, sparkling little French *chansons*, and some of the most pathetic music of the Italian operas; but every thing for his

taste must be soft and low: all roulades and execution, all the fireworks of music, he held in utter detestation.

Then Annie would be called away to write notes for Lady Beauport, or to go out with her or for her, and Caterham would be left alone again. Pleasanter his thoughts now: there were the flowers she had gathered and placed close by him, the books she had read from, the ivory keys which her dear fingers had so recently touched! Her cheerful voice still rung in his ear, the touch of her hand seemed yet to linger on his forehead. O angel of light and almost of hope to this wretched frame, O sole realisation of womanly love and tenderness and sweet sympathy to this crushed spirit, wilt thou ever know it all? Yes, he felt that there would come a time, and that without long delay, when he should be able to tell her all the secret longings of his soul, to tell her in a few short words, and then — ay, then!

Meanwhile it was pleasant to lie in a half-dreamy state, thinking of her, picturing her to his fancy. He would lie on that sofa, his poor warped useless limbs stretched out before him, but hidden from his sight by a light silk *couvrette* of Annie's embroidering, his eyes closed, his whole frame in a state of repose. Through the double windows came deadened sounds of the world outside — the roll of carriages, the clanging of knockers, the busy hum of life. From the Square-garden came the glad voices of children, and now and then — solitary fragment of rusticity — the sound of the Square-gardener whet-

ting his scythe. And Caterham lay day by day dreaming through it all, unroused even by the repetition of Czerny's pianoforte-exercises by the children in the next house; dreaming of his past, his present, and his future. Dreaming of the old farmhouse where they had sent him when a child to try and get strength — the quaint red-faced old house with its gable ends and mullioned windows, and its eternal and omnipresent smell of apples; of the sluggish black pool where the cattle stood knee-deep; the names of the fields — the home-croft, and the lea pasture, and the forty acres; the harvest home, and the songs that they sung then, and to which he had listened in wonder sitting on the farmer's knee. He had not thought of all this from that day forth; but he remembered it vividly now, and could almost hear the loud ticking of the farmer's silver watch which fitted so tightly into his fob. The lodgings at Brighton, where he went with some old lady, never recollected but in connection with that one occasion, and called Miss Macraw, — the little lodgings with the bow-windowed room looking side-ways over the sea; the happiness of that time, when the old lady perpetually talked to and amused him, when he was not left alone as he was at home, and when he had such delicious tea-cakes, which he toasted for himself. The doctors who came to see him there; one a tall white-haired old man in a long black coat reaching to his heels, and another a jolly bald-headed man, who, they said, was surgeon to the King. The King — ay, he had seen him too, a red-faced man in a blue

coat, walking in the Pavillon Gardens. Dreaming of the private tutor, a master at Charter House, who came on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, and who struggled so hard, and with such little success to conceal his hatred to Homer, Virgil, and the other classic poets, and his longing to be in the cricket-field, on the river, any where, to shake off that horrible conventional toil of tutorship, and to be a man and not a teaching-machine. Other recollections he had, of Lionel's pony and Lionel's Eton school-fellows, who came to see him in the holidays, and who stared in mute wonder at his wheel-chair and his poor crippled limbs. Recollections of his father and mother passing down the staircase in full dress on their way to some court-ball, and of his hearing the servants say what a noble-looking man his father was, and what a pity that Master Lionel had not been the eldest son. Recollections of the utter blankness of his life until she came — ah, until she came! The past faded away, and the present dawned. She was there, his star, his hope, his love! He was still a cripple, maimed and blighted; still worse than an invalid, the prey of acute and torturing disease; but he would be content — content to remain even as he was, so that he could have her near him, could see her, hear her voice, touch her hand. But that could not be. She would marry, would leave him, and then — ah then! — Let that future which he believed to be close upon him come at once. Until he had known hope, his life, though blank enough, had been supportable; now hope had fled; "the sooner

it's over the sooner to sleep." Let there be an end of it!

There were but few days that Algy Barford did not come; bright, airy, and cheerful, bringing sunshine into the sick-room; never noisy or obtrusive, always taking a cheery view of affairs, and never failing to tell the invalid that he looked infinitely better than the last time he had seen him, and that this illness was "evidently a kind of clearing-up shower before the storm, dear old boy," and was the precursor of such excellent health as he had never had before. Lord Caterham, of course, never believed any of this; he had an internal monitor which told him very different truths; but he knew the feelings which prompted Algy Barford's hopeful predictions, and no man's visits were so agreeable to Caterham as were Algy's.

One day he came in earlier than usual, and looking less serenely happy than his wont. Lord Caterham, lying on his sofa, observed this, but said nothing, waiting until Algy should allude to it, as he was certain to do, for he had not the smallest power of reticence.

"Caterham, my dear old boy, how goes it this morning? I am seedy, my friend! The sage counsel given by the convivial bagman, that the evening's diversion should bear the morning's reflection, has not been followed by me. Does the cognac live in its usual corner, and is there yet soda-water in the land?"

"You'll find both in the sideboard, Algy. What were you doing last night to render them necessary?"

"Last night, my dear Caterham, I did what England expected me to do — my duty, and a most horrible nuisance that doing one's duty is. I dined with an old fellow named Huskisson, a friend of my governor's, who nearly poisoned me with bad wine. The wine, sir, was simply infamous; but it was a very hot night, and I was dreadfully thirsty, so what could I do but drink a great deal of it? I had some very fiery sherry with my soup, and some hock. Yes; 'nor did my drooping memory shun the foaming grape of eastern France;' only this was the foaming gooseberry of Fulham Fields. And old Huskisson, with great pomp, told his butler to bring "the Hermitage.' What an awful swindle!"

"What was it like?"

"Well, dear old boy, minds innocent and quiet may take that for a Hermitage if they like; but I who have drunk as much wine, good and bad, as most men, immediately recognised the familiar Beaujolais, which we get at the club for a shilling a pint. So that altogether I'm very nearly poisoned; and I think I shouldn't have come out if I had not wanted to see you particularly."

"What is it, Algy? Some of that tremendously important business which always takes up so much of your time?"

"No, no; now you're chaffing, Caterham. 'Pon my word I really do a great deal in the course of the day, walking about, and talking to fellows, and that sort of thing: there are very few fellows who think what a lot I get through; but I know myself."

"Do you? then you've learned a great thing —

'know thyself,' one of the great secrets of life;" and Caterham sighed.

"Yes, dear old boy," said Algy; "'know thyself, but never introduce a friend;' that I believe to be sterling philosophy. This is a confoundedly back-slapping age; every body is a deuced sight too fond of every body else; there is an amount of philanthropy about which is quite terrible."

"Yes, and you're about the largest-hearted and most genial philanthropist in the world; you know you are."

"I, dear old boy? I am Richard Crookback; I am the uncle of the Babes in the Wood; I am Timon the Tartar of Athens, or whatever his name was; I am a ruthless hater of all my species, when I have the *vin triste*, as I have this morning. O, that reminds me — the business I came to see you about. What a fellow you are, Caterham! always putting things out of fellows' heads!"

"Well, what is it now?"

"Why, old Ampthill is dead at last. Died last night; his man told my man this morning."

"Well, what then?"

"What then? Why, don't you recollect what we talked about? about his leaving his money to dear old Lionel?"

"Yes," said Caterham, looking grave, "I recollect that."

"I wonder whether any good came of it? It would be a tremendously jolly thing to get dear old Lionel back, with plenty of money, and in his old position, wouldn't it?"

"Look here, my dear Algy," said Lord Caterham; "let us understand each other once for all on this point. You and I are of course likely to differ materially on such a subject. You are a man of the world, going constantly into the world, with your own admirable good sense influenced by and impressed with the opinions of society. Society, as you tell me, is pleased to think my brother's — well, crime — there's no other word! — my brother's crime a venial one, and will be content to receive him back again, and to instal him in his former position, if he comes back prepared to sacrifice to Society by spending his time and money on it!"

"Pardon me, my dear old Caterham, — just two words!" interrupted Algy. "Society — people, you know, I mean — would shake their heads at poor old Lionel, and wouldn't have him back perhaps, and all that sort of thing, if they knew exactly what he'd done. But they don't. It's been kept wonderfully quiet, poor dear old fellow."

"That may or may not be; at all events, such are Society's views, are they not?" Barford inclined his head. "Now, you see, mine are entirely different. This sofa, the bed in the next room, that wheel-chair form my world; and these," pointing to his bookshelves, "my society. There is no one else on earth to whom I would say this; but you know that what I say is true. Lionel Brakespere never was a brother to me, never had the slightest affection or regard for me, never had the slightest patience with me. As a boy, he used to mock at my deformity; as a man, he has perseveringly scorned me,

and scarcely troubled himself to hide his anxiety for my death, that he might be Lord Beauport's heir —"

"Caterham! I say, my dear, dear old boy Arthur —" and Algy Barford put one hand on the back of Lord Caterham's chair, and rubbed his own eyes very hard with the other.

"You know it, Algy, old friend. He did all this; and God knows I tried to love him through it all, and think I succeeded. All his scorn, all his insult, all his want of affection, I forgave. When he committed the forgery which forced him to fly the country, I tried to intercede with my father; for I knew the awful strait to which Lionel must have been reduced before he committed such an act: but when I read his letter, which you brought me, and the contents of which it said you knew, I recognised at last that Lionel was a thoroughly heartless scoundrel, and I thanked God that there was no chance of his further disgracing our name in a place where it had been known and respected. So you now see, Algy, why I am not enchanted at the idea of his coming back to us."

"Of course, of course, I understand you, dear fellow; and — hem! — confoundedly husky; that filthy wine of old Huskisson's! better in a minute — there!" and Algy cleared his throat and rubbed his eyes again. "About that letter, dear old boy! I was going to speak to you two or three times about that. Most mysterious circumstance, by Jove, sir! The fact is that —"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door

and the entrance of Stephens, Lord Caterham's servant, who said that Lady Beauport would be glad to know if his master could receive her.

It was a bad day for Caterham to receive any one except his most intimate friends, and assuredly his mother was not included in that category. He was any thing but well bodily, and the conversation about Lionel had thoroughly unstrung his nerves; so that he was just about to say he must ask for a postponement of the visit, when Stephens said, "Her ladyship asked me if Mr. Barford wasn't here, my lord, and seemed particular anxious to see him." Lord Caterham felt the colour flush in his cheeks as the cause of his mother's visit was thus innocently explained by Stephens; but the moment after he smiled, and sent to beg that she would come whenever she pleased.

In a very few minutes Lady Beauport sailed into the room, and, after shaking hands with Algy Barford in, for her, quite a cordial manner, she touched her son's forehead with her lips and dropped into the chair which Stephens had placed for her near the sofa.

"How are you, Arthur, to-day?" she commenced. "You are looking quite rosy and well, I declare. I am always obliged to come myself when I want to know about your health; for they bring me the most preposterous reports. That man of yours is a dreadful kill-joy, and seems to have inoculated the whole household with his melancholy, where you are concerned. Even Miss Maurice, who is really quite a cheerful person, and quite pleasant to have about

one, — equable spirits, and that sort of thing, you know, Mr. Barford; so much more agreeable than those moping creatures who are always thinking about their families and their fortunes, you know, — even Miss Maurice can scarcely be trusted for what I call a reliable report of Caterham."

"It's the interest we take in him, dear Lady Beauport, that keeps us constantly on the *qui vive*. He's such a tremendously lovable old fellow, that we're all specially careful about him;" and Algy's hand went round to the back of Caterham's sofa and his eyes glistened as before.

"Of course," said Lady Beauport, still in her hard dry voice. "With care every thing may be done. There's Alice Wentworth, Lady Broughton's granddaughter, was sent away in the autumn to Torquay, and they all declared she could not live. And I saw her last night at the French embassy, well and strong, and dancing away as hard as any girl in the room. It's a great pity you couldn't have gone to the embassy last night, Arthur; you'd have enjoyed it very much."

"Do you think so, mother?" said Caterham with a sad smile. "I scarcely think it would have amused me, or that they would have cared much to have me there."

"O, I don't know; the Duchess de St. Lazare asked after you very kindly, and so did the Vicomte, who is—" and Lady Beauport stopped short.

"Yes, I know — who is a cripple also," said Caterham quietly. "But he is only lame; he can

get about by himself. But if I had gone, I should have wanted Algy here to carry me on his back."

"Gad, dear old boy, if carrying you on my back would do you any good, or help you to get about to any place you wanted to go to, I'd do it fast enough; give you a regular Derby canter over any course you like to name."

"I know you would, Algy, old friend. You see every one is very kind, and I am doing very well indeed, though I'm scarcely in condition for a ball at the French embassy. — By the way, mother, did you not want to speak to Barford about something?"

"I did, indeed," said Lady Beauport. "I have heard just now, Mr. Barford, that old Mr. Ampthill died last night?"

"Perfectly true, Lady Beauport. I myself had the same information."

"But you heard nothing further?"

"Nothing at all, except that the poor old gentleman, after a curious eccentric life, made a quiet commonplace end, dying peacefully and happily."

"Yes, yes; but you heard nothing about the way in which his property is left, I suppose?"

"Not one syllable. He was very wealthy, was he not?"

"My husband says that the Boxwood property was worth from twelve to fifteen thousand a-year; but I imagine this is rather an under-estimate. I wonder whether there is any chance for — what I talked to you about the other day."

"Impossible to say, dear Lady Beauport," said

Algy, with an awkward glance at Caterham, which Lady Beauport observed.

"O, you needn't mind Caterham one bit, Mr. Barford. — Any thing which would do good to poor Lionel I'm sure you'd be glad of, wouldn't you, Arthur?"

"Any thing that would do him good, yes."

"Of course; and to be Mr. Ampthill's heir would do him a great deal of good. It is that Mr. Barford and I are discussing. Mr. Barford was good enough to speak to me some time ago, when it was first expected that Mr. Ampthill's illness would prove dangerous, and to suggest that, as poor Lionel had always been a favourite with the old gentleman, something might be done for him, perhaps, there being so few relations. I spoke to your father, who called two or three times in Curzon Street, and always found Mr. Ampthill very civil and polite, but he never mentioned Lionel's name."

"That did not look particularly satisfactory, did it?" asked Algy.

"Well, it would have looked bad in any one else; but with such an extremely eccentric person as Mr. Ampthill, I really cannot say I think so. He was just one of those oddities who would carefully refrain from mentioning the person about whom their thoughts were most occupied. — I cannot talk to your father about this matter, Arthur; he is so dreadfully set against poor Lionel, that he will not listen to a word. — But I need not tell you, Mr. Barford, I myself am horribly anxious."

Perfectly appreciating Lord Beauport's anger;

conscious that it was fully shared by Caterham; with tender recollections of Lionel, whom he had known from childhood; and with a desire to say something pleasant to Lady Beauport, all Algy Barford could ejaculate was, "Of course, of course."

"I hear that old Mr. Trivett the lawyer was with him two or three times about a month ago, which looks as if he had been making his will. I met Mr. Trivett at the Dunsinanes in the autumn, and at Beauport's request was civil to him. I would not mind asking him to dine here one day this week, if I thought it would be of any use."

Caterham looked very grave; but Algy Barford gave a great laugh, and seemed immensely amused. "How do you mean 'of any use,' Lady Beauport? You don't think you would get any information out of old Trivett, do you? He's the deadest hand at a secret in the world. He never lets out any thing. If you ask him what it is o'clock, you have to dig the information out of him with a ripping-chisel. O, no; it's not the smallest use trying to learn any thing from Mr. Trivett."

"Is there, then, no means of finding out what the will contains?"

"No, mother," interrupted Caterham; "none at all. You must wait until the will is read after the funeral; or perhaps, till you see a *résumé* of it in the illustrated papers."

"You are very odd, Arthur," said Lady Beauport; "really sometimes you would seem to have forgotten the usages of society. — I appeal to you, Mr. Barford. Is what Lord Caterham says correct?

Is there no other way of learning what I want to know?"

"Dear Lady Beauport, I fear there is none."

"Very well, then; I must be patient and wait. But there's no harm in speculating how the money could be left. Who did Mr. Ampthill know now? There was Mrs. Macraw, widow of a dissenting minister, who used to read to him; and there was his physician, Sir Charles Dumfunk: I shouldn't wonder if he had a legacy."

"And there was Algernon Barford, commonly known as the Honourable Algernon Barford, who used to dine with the old gentleman half-a-dozen times every season, and who had the honour of being called a very good fellow by him."

"O, Algy, I hope he has left you his fortune," said Caterham warmly. "There's no one in the world would spend it to better purpose."

"Well," said Lady Beauport, "I will leave you now. — I know I may depend upon you, Mr. Barford, to give me the very first news on this important subject."

Algy Barford bowed, rose, and opened the door to let Lady Beauport pass out. As she walked by him, she gave him a look which made him follow her and close the door behind him.

"I didn't like to say any thing before Caterham," she said, "who is, you know, very odd and queer, and seems to have taken quite a singular view of poor Lionel's conduct. But the fact is, that, after the last time you spoke to me, I — I thought

it best to write to Lionel, to tell him that —" and she hesitated.

"To tell him what, Lady Beauport?" asked Algy, resolutely determined not to help her in the least.

"To tell him to come back to us — to me — to his mother!" said Lady Beauport with a sudden access of passion. "I cannot live any longer without my darling son! I have told Beauport this. What does it signify that he has been unfortunate — wicked if you will! How many others have been the same! And our influence could get him something somewhere, even if this inheritance should not be his. O my God! only to see him again! My darling boy! my own darling handsome boy!"

Ah, how many years since Gertrude, Countess of Beauport, had allowed real, natural, hot, blinding tears to course down her cheeks! The society people, who only knew her as the calmest, most collected, most imperious woman amongst them, would hardly recognise this palpitating frame, those tear-blurred features. The sight completely finishes Algy Barford, already very much upset by the news which Lady Beauport has communicated, and he can only proffer a seat, and suggest that he should fetch a glass of sherry. Lady Beauport, her burst of passion over, recovers all her usual dignity, presses Algy's hand, lays her finger on her lip to enjoin silence, and sails along as unbending as before. Algy Barford, still dazed by the tidings he has heard, goes back to Caterham's room, to find his friend lying with his eyes half-closed, meditating over the recent

discussion. Caterham scarcely seemed to have noticed Algy's absence; for he said, as if in continuance of the conversation: "And do *you* think this money will come to Lionel, Algy?"

"I can scarcely tell, dear old boy. It's on the cards, but the betting is heavily against it. However, we shall know in a very few days."

In a very few days they did know. The funeral, to which Earl Beauport and Algy Barford were invited, and which they attended, was over, and Mr. Trivett had requested them to return with him in the mourning-coach to Curzon Street. There, in the jolly little dining-room, which had so often enshrined the hospitality of the quaint, eccentric, warm-hearted old gentleman whose earthly remains they had left behind them at Kensal Green, after some cake and wine, old Mr. Trivett took from a blue bag, which had been left there for him by his clerk, the will of the deceased, and putting on his blue-steel spectacles, commenced reading it aloud. The executors appointed were George Earl Beauport and Algernon Barford, and to each of them was bequeathed a legacy of a thousand pounds. To Algernon Barford, "a good fellow, who, I know, will spend it like a gentleman," was also left a thousand pounds. There were legacies of five hundred pounds each "to John Saunders, my faithful valet, and to Rebecca, his wife, my cook and housekeeper." There was a legacy of one hundred pounds to the librarian of the Minerva Club, "to whom I have given much trouble." The library of books, the statues, pictures, and

curios were bequeathed to "my cousin Arthur, Viscount Caterham, the only member of my family who can appreciate them;" and "the entire residue of my fortune, my estate at Boxwood, money standing in the funds and other securities, plate, wines, carriages, horses, and all my property, to Anna, only daughter of my second cousin, the late Ralph Ampthill Maurice, Esq., formerly of the Priory, Willesden, whom I name my residuary legatee."

CHAPTER X.

Lady Beauport's Plot.

YES; little Annie Maurice, Lady Beauport's companion, was the heiress of the rich and eccentric Mr. Ampthill, so long known in society. The fact was a grand thing for the paragraph-mongers and the diners-out, all of whom distorted it in every possible way, and told the most inconceivable lies about it. That Annie was Mr. Ampthill's natural daughter, and had been left on a door-step, and was adopted by Lady Beauport, who had found her in an orphan-asylum; that Mr. Ampthill had suddenly determined upon leaving all his property to the first person he might meet on a certain day, and that Annie Maurice was the fortunate individual; that the will had been made purposely to spite Lady Beauport, with whom Mr. Ampthill, when a young man, had been madly in love — all these rumours went the round of the gossip-columns of the journals and of Society's dinner-parties. Other stories there were, perhaps a little nearer to truth, which explained that it was not until after Lionel Brakespere's last escapade he had been disinherited, indeed, that Parkinson of Thavies Inn and Scadgers of Berners Street had looked upon his inheritance as such a certainty, that they had made considerable advances on the strength of it, and would be heavily

hit; while a rumour, traceable to the old gentleman's housekeeper, stated that Annie Maurice was the only one of Mr. Ampthill's connections who had never fawned on him, flattered him, or in any way intrigued for his favour.

Be this as it might, the fact remained that Annie was now the possessor of a large fortune, and consequently a person of great importance to all her friends and acquaintance — a limited number, but quite sufficient to discuss her rise in life with every kind of asperity. They wondered how she would bear it; whether she would give herself airs; how soon, and to what member of the peerage, she would be married. How *did* she bear it? When Lord Beauport sent for her to his study, after Mr. Ampthill's funeral, and told her what he had heard, she burst into tears; which was weak, but not unnatural. Then, with her usual straightforward common-sense, she set about forming her plans. She had never seen her benefactor, so that even Mrs. Grundy herself could scarcely have called on Annie to affect sorrow for his loss; and indeed remarks were made by Mr. Ampthill's old butler and housekeeper (who, being provided with mourning out of the estate, were as black and as shiny as a couple of old rooks) about the very mitigated grief which Annie chose to exhibit in her attire.

Then as to her mode of life. For the present, at least, she determined to make no change in it. She said so at once to Lord Beauport, expressing an earnest hope that she should be allowed to remain under his roof, where she had been so happy, until

she had settled how and where she should live; and Lord Beauport replied that it would give him — and he was sure he might speak for Lady Beauport — the greatest pleasure to have Miss Maurice with them. He brought a message to that effect from Lady Beauport, who had one of her dreadful neuralgic attacks, and could see no one, but who sent her kind love to Miss Maurice, and her heartiest congratulations, and hope that Miss Maurice would remain with them as long as she pleased. The servants of the house, who heard of the good fortune of "the young lady," rejoiced greatly at it, and suggested that miss would go hout of this at once, and leave my lady to grump about in that hold carriage by herself. They were greatly astonished, therefore, the next morning to find Annie seated at the nine-o'clock breakfast-table, preparing Lady Beauport's chocolate, and dressed just as usual. They had expected that the first sign of her independence would be lying in bed till noon, and then appearing in a gorgeous wrapper, such as the ladies in the penny romances always wore in the mornings; and they could only account for her conduct by supposing that she had to give a month's warning and must work out her time. Lady Beauport herself was astonished when, the necessity for the neuralgic attack being over, she found Annie coming to ask her, as usual, what letters she required written, and whether she should pay any calls for her ladyship. Lady Beauport delicately remonstrated; but Annie declared that she would infinitely prefer doing exactly as she had been accustomed to, so long as she should remain in the house.

So long as she should remain in the house! That was exactly the point on which Lady Beauport was filled with hope and dread. Her ladyship had been cruelly disappointed in Mr. Ampthill's will. She had suffered herself to hope against hope, and to shut her eyes to all unfavourable symptoms. The old gentleman had taken so much notice of Lionel when a boy, had spoken so warmly of him, had made so much of him, that he could not fail to make him his heir. In vain had Lord Beauport spoken to her more plainly than was his wont, pointing out that Lionel's was no venial crime; that Mr. Ampthill probably had heard of it, inasmuch as he never afterwards mentioned the young man's name; that however his son's position might be reinstated before the world, the act could never be forgotten. In vain Algy Barford shook his head, and Caterham preserved a gloomy silence worse than any speech. Lady Beauport's hopes did not desert her until she heard the actual and final announcement. Almost simultaneously with this came Lord Beauport with Annie's request that she should be permitted to continue an inmate of the house; and immediately Lady Beauport conceived and struck out a new plan of action. The heritage was lost to Lionel; but the heiress was Annie Maurice, a girl domiciled with them, clinging to them; unlikely, at least for the few ensuing months, to go into the world, to give the least chance to any designing fortune-hunter. And Lionel was coming home! His mother was certain that the letter which she had written to him on the first

news of Mr. Ampthill's illness would induce him, already sick of exile, to start for England. He would arrive soon, and then the season would be over; they would all go away to Homershams, or one of Beauport's places; they would not have any company for some time, and Lionel would be thrown into Annie Maurice's society; and it would be hard if he, with his handsome face, his fascinating manners, and his experience of women and the world, were not able to make an easy conquest of this simple quiet young girl, and thus to secure the fortune which his mother had originally expected for him.

Such was Lady Beauport's day-dream now, and to its realisation she gave up every thought, in reference to it she planned every action. It has already been stated that she had always treated Annie with respect, and even with regard: so that the idea of patronage, the notion of behaving to her companion in any thing but the spirit of a lady, had never entered her mind. But now there was an amount of affectionate interest mingled with her regard which Annie could not fail to perceive and to be gratified with. All was done in the most delicate manner. Lady Beauport never forgot the lady in the *intrigante;* her advances were of the subtlest kind; her hints were given and allusions were made in the most guarded manner. She accepted Annie's assistance as her amanuensis, and she left to her the usual colloquies on domestic matters with the housekeeper, because she saw that Annie wished it to be so; and she still drove out

with her in the carriage, only insisting that Annie should sit by her side instead of opposite on the back-seat. And instead of the dignified silence of the employer, only speaking when requiring an answer, Lady Beauport would keep up a perpetual conversation, constantly recurring to the satisfaction it gave her to have Annie still with her. "I declare I don't know what I should have done if you had left me, Annie!" she would say. "I'm sure it was the mere thought of having to be left by myself, or to the tender mercies of somebody who knew nothing about me, that gave me that last frightful attack of neuralgia. You see I am an old woman now; and though the Carringtons are proverbially strong and long-lived, yet I have lost all my elasticity of spirit, and feel I could not shape myself to any person's way now. And poor Caterham too! I cannot think how he would ever get on without you. You seem now to be an essential part of his life. Poor Caterham! Ah, how I wish you had seen my other son, my boy Lionel! Such a splendid fellow; so handsome! Ah, Lord Beauport was dreadfully severe on him, poor fellow, that night, —you recollect, when he had you and Caterham in to tell you about poor Lionel; as though young men would not be always young men. Poor Lionel!" Poor Lionel! that was the text of Lady Beauport's discourse whenever she addressed herself to Annie Maurice.

It was not to be supposed that Annie's change of fortune had not a great effect upon Lord Caterham. When he first heard of it — from Algy

Barford, who came direct to him from the reading of the will — he rejoiced that at least her future was secure; that, come what might to him or his parents, there would be a provision for her; that no chance of her being reduced to want, or of her having to consult the prejudices of other people, and to perform a kind of genteel servitude with any who could not appreciate her worth could now arise. But with this feeling another soon mingled. Up to that time she had been all in all to him — to him; simply because to the outside world she was nobody, merely Lady Beauport's companion, about whom none troubled themselves; now she was Miss Maurice the heiress, and in a very different position. They could not hope to keep her to themselves; they could not hope to keep her free from the crowd of mercenary adorers always looking out for every woman with money whom they might devour. In her own common-sense lay her strongest safeguard; and that, although reliable on all ordinary occasions, had never been exposed to so severe a trial as flattery and success. Were not the schemers already plotting? even within the citadel was there not a traitor? Algy Barford had kept his trust, and had not betrayed one word of what Lady Beauport had told him; but from stray expressions dropped now and again, and from the general tenor of his mother's behaviour, Lord Caterham saw plainly what she was endeavouring to bring about. On that subject his mind was made up. He had such thorough confidence in Annie's goodness, in her power of discrimination between right and

wrong, that he felt certain that she could never bring herself to love his brother Lionel, however handsome his face, however specious his manner; but if, woman-like, she should give way and follow her inclination rather than her reason, then he determined to talk to her plainly and openly, and to do every thing in his power to prevent the result on which his mother had set her heart.

There was not a scrap of selfishness in all this. However deeply Arthur Caterham loved Annie Maurice, the hope of making her his had never for an instant arisen in his breast. He knew too well that a mysterious decree of Providence had shut him out from the roll of those who are loved by woman, save in pity or sympathy; and it was with a feeling of relief rather than regret, that of late — within the last few months — he had felt an inward presentiment that his commerce with Life was almost at an end, that his connection with that Vanity Fair, through which he had been wheeled as a spectator, but in the occupation or amusement of which he had never participated, was about to cease. He loved her so dearly, that the thought of her future was always before him, and caused him infinite anxiety. Worst of all, there was no one of whom he could make a confidant amongst his acquaintance. Algy Barford would do any thing; but he was a bachelor, which would incapacitate him, and by far too easy-going, trouble-hating, and unimpressive. Who else was there? Ah, a good thought! — that man Ludlow, the artist; an old friend of Annie's, for whom she had so great a

regard. He was not particularly strong-minded out of his profession; but his devotion to his child-friend was undoubted; and besides, he was a man of education and common-sense, rising, too, to a position which would insure his being heard. He would talk with Ludlow about Annie's future; so he wrote off to Geoffrey by the next post, begging him to come and see him as soon as possible. Yes, he could look at it all quite steadily now. Heaven knows, life to him had been no such happiness as to make its surrender painful or difficult. It was only as he neared his journey's end, he thought, that any light had been shed upon his path, and when that should be extinguished he would have no heart to go further. No: let the end come, as he knew it was coming, swiftly and surely; only let him think that *her* future was secured, and he could die more than contented — happy.

Her future secured! ah, that he should not live to see! It could not, must not be by a marriage with Lionel. His mother had never broached that subject openly to him, and therefore he had hitherto felt a delicacy in alluding to it in conversation with her; but he would before — well, he would in time. Not that he had much fear of Annie's succumbing to his brother's fascinations; he rated her too highly for that. It was not — and he took up a photographic album which lay on his table, as the idea passed through his mind — it was not that careless reckless expression, that easy insolent *pose*, which would have any effect on Annie Maurice's mental constitution. Those who imagine that women are

enslaved through their eyes — true women — women worth winning at least — are horribly mistaken, he thought, and — And then at that instant he turned the page and came upon a photograph of himself, in which the artist had done his best so far as arrangement went, but which was so fatally truthful in its display of his deformity, that Lord Caterham closed the book with a shudder, and sunk back on his couch.

His painful reverie was broken by the entrance of Stephens, who announced that Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow were waiting to see his master. Caterham, who was unprepared for a visit from Mrs. Ludlow, gave orders that they should be at once admitted. Mrs. Ludlow came in leaning on her husband's arm, and looking so pale and interesting, that Caterham at once recollected the event he had seen announced in the *Times*, and began to apologise.

"My dear Mrs. Ludlow, what a horrible wretch I am to have asked your husband to come and see me, when of course he was fully occupied at home attending to you and the baby!" Then they both laughed; and Geoff said:

"This is her first day out, Lord Caterham; but I had promised to take her for a drive; and as you wanted to see me, I thought that —"

"That the air of St. Barnabas Square, the fresh breezes from the Thames, and the cheerful noise of the embankment-people, would be about the best thing for an invalid, eh?"

"Well — scarcely! but that as it was only stated that my wife should go for a quiet drive, I, who

have neither the time nor the opportunity for such things, might utilise the occasion by complying with the request of a gentleman who has proved himself deserving of my respect."

"A hit! a very palpable hit, Mr. Ludlow!" said Caterham. "I bow, and — as the common phrase goes — am sorry I spoke. But we must not talk business when you have brought Mrs. Ludlow out for amusement."

"O, pray don't think of me, Lord Caterham," said Margaret; "I can always amuse myself."

"O, of course; the mere recollection of baby would keep you sufficiently employed — at least, so you would have us believe. But I'm an old bachelor, and discredit such things. So there's a book of photographs for you to amuse yourself with while we talk. — Now, Mr. Ludlow, for our conversation. Since we met, your old friend Annie Maurice has inherited a very large property."

"So I have heard to my great surprise and delight. But I live so much out of the world that I scarcely knew whether it was true, and had determined to ask you the first time I should see you."

"O, it's thoroughly true. She is the heiress of old Mr. Ampthill, who was a second cousin of her father's. But it was about her future career, as heiress of all this property, that I wanted to speak to you, you see. — I beg your pardon, Mrs. Ludlow, what did you say?"

Her face was dead white, her lips trembled, and

it was with great difficulty she said any thing at all; but she did gasp out, "Who is this?"

"That," said Lord Caterham, bending over the book; "O, that is the portrait of my younger brother, Lionel Brakespere; he —" but Caterham stopped short in his explanation, for Mrs. Ludlow fell backward in a swoon.

And every one afterwards said that it was very thoughtless of her to take such a long drive so soon after her confinement.

CHAPTER XI.

Conjectures.

Miss Maurice was not in the house when Geoffrey Ludlow and his wife made that visit to Lord Caterham which had so plainly manifested Margaret's imprudence and inexperience. The housekeeper and one of the housemaids had come to the assistance of the gentlemen, both equally alarmed, and one at least calculated to be, of all men living, the most helpless under the circumstances. Geoffrey was "awfully frightened," as he told her afterwards, when Margaret fainted.

"I shall never forget the whiteness of your face, my darling, and the dreadful sealed look of your eyelids. I thought in a moment that was how you would look if you were dead; and what should I do if I ever had to see *that* sight!"

This loving speech Geoffrey made to his wife as they drove homewards, — she pale, silent, and coldly abstracted; he full of tender anxiety for her comfort and apprehension for her health, — sentiments which rendered him, to say the truth, rather a trying companion in a carriage; for he was constantly pulling the glasses up and down, fixing them a button-hole higher or lower, rearranging the blinds, and giving the coachman contradictory orders. These proceedings were productive of no apparent annoyance

to Margaret, who lay back against the cushions with eyes open and moody, and her underlip caught beneath her teeth. She maintained unbroken silence until they reached home, and then briefly telling Geoffrey that she was going to her room to lie down, she left him.

"She's not strong," said Geoffrey, as he proceeded to disembarrass himself of his outdoor attire, and to don his "working-clothes," — "she's not strong; and it's very odd she's not more cheerful. I thought the child would have made it all right; but perhaps it will when she's stronger." And Geoff sighed as he went to his work, and sighed again once or twice as he pursued it.

Meanwhile Lord Caterham was thinking over the startling incident which had just occurred. He was an observant man naturally, and the enforced inaction of his life had increased this tendency; while his long and deep experience of physical suffering and weakness had rendered him acutely alive to any manifestations of a similar kind in other people. Mrs. Ludlow's fainting-fit puzzled him. She had been looking so remarkably well when she came in; there had been nothing feverish, nothing suggestive of fictitious strength or over-exertion in her appearance; no feebleness in her manner or languor in the tone of her voice. The suddenness and completeness of the swoon were strange, — were so much beyond the ordinary faintness which a drive undertaken a little too soon might be supposed to produce, — and the expression of Margaret's face, when she had recovered her consciousness, was so remarkable, that

Lord Caterham felt instinctively the true origin of her illness had not been that assigned to it.

"She looked half-a-dozen years older," he thought: "and the few words she said were spoken as if she were in a dream. I must be more mistaken than I have ever been, or there is something very wrong about that woman. And what a good fellow he is!— what a simple-hearted blundering kind fellow! How wonderful his blindness is! I saw in a moment how he loved her, how utterly uninterested she is in him and his affairs. I hope there may be nothing worse than lack of interest; but I am afraid, very much afraid for Ludlow."

And then Lord Caterham's thoughts wandered away from the artist and his beautiful wife to that other subject which occupied them so constantly, and with which every other cogitation or contemplation contrived to mingle itself in an unaccountable manner, on which he did not care to reason, and against which he did not attempt to strive. What did it matter now? He might be ever so much engrossed, and no effort at self-control or self-conquest would be called for; the feelings he cherished unchecked could not harm any one — could not harm himself now. There was great relief, great peace in that thought, — no strife for him to enter on, no struggle in which his suffering body and weary mind must engage. The end would be soon with him now; and while he waited for it, he might love this bright young girl with all the power of his heart.

So Lord Caterham lay quite still upon the couch

on which they had placed Margaret when she fainted, and thought over all he had intended to say to Geoffrey, and must now seek another opportunity of saying, and turned over in his mind sundry difficulties which he began to foresee in the way of his cherished plan, and which would probably arise in the direction of Mrs. Ludlow. Annie and Margaret had not hitherto seen much of each other, as has already appeared; and there was something ominous in the occurrence of that morning which troubled Lord Caterham's mind and disturbed his preconcerted arrangements. If trouble — trouble of some unknown kind, but, as he intuitively felt, of a serious nature — were hanging over Geoffrey Ludlow's head, what was to become of his guardianship of Annie in the future, — that future which Lord Caterham felt was drawing so near; that future which would find her without a friend, and would leave her exposed to countless flatterers. He was pondering upon these things when Annie entered the room, bright and blooming, after her drive in the balmy summer air, and carrying a gorgeous bouquet of crimson roses.

She was followed by Stephens, carrying two tall Venetian glasses. He placed them on a table, and then withdrew.

"Look, Arthur," said Annie; "we've been to Fulham, and I got these fresh cut, all for your own self, at the nursery-gardens. None of those horrid formal tied-up bouquets for you, or for me either, with the buds stuck on with wires, and nasty fluffy bits of cotton sticking to the leaves. I went round

with the man, and made him cut each rose as I pointed it out; and they're such beauties, Arthur! Here's one for you to wear and smell and spoil; but the others I'm going to keep fresh for ever so long."

She went over to the couch and gave him the rose, a rich crimson full-formed flower, gorgeous in colour and exquisite in perfume. He took it with a smile and held it in his hand.

"Why don't you put it in your button-hole, Lord Caterham?" said Annie, with a pretty air of pettishness which became her well.

"Why?" said Lord Caterham. "Do you think I am exactly the style of man to wear posies and breast-knots, little Annie?" His tone was sad through its playfulness.

"Nonsense, Arthur," she began; "you —" Then she looked at him, and stopped suddenly, and her face changed. "Have you been worse to-day? You look very pale. Have you been in pain? Did you want me?"

"No, no, my child," said Lord Caterham; "I am just as usual. Go on with your flowers, Annie, — settle them up, lest they fade. They are beautiful indeed, and we'll keep them as long as we can."

She was not reassured, and she still stood and gazed earnestly at him.

"I am all right, Annie, — I am indeed. My head is even easier than usual. But some one has been ill, if I haven't. Your friends the Ludlows were here to-day. Did no one tell you as you came in?"

"No, I did not see any one; I left my bonnet in the ante-room and came straight in here. I only called to Stephens to bring the flower-glasses. Was Mrs. Ludlow ill, Arthur? Did she come to see me?"

"I don't think so — she only came, I think, because I wanted to see Ludlow, and he took advantage of the circumstance to have a drive with her. Have you seen her since the child was born?"

"No, I called, but only to inquire. But was she ill? What happened?"

"Well, she was ill — she fainted. Ludlow and I were just beginning to talk, and, at her own request, leaving her to amuse herself with the photographs and things lying about — and she had just asked me some trifling question, something about Lionel's portrait — whose it was, I think — when she suddenly fainted. I don't think there could be a more complete swoon; she really looked as though she were dead."

"What did you do? was Geoffrey frightened?"

"Yes, we were both frightened. Stephens came, and two of the women. Ludlow was terrified; but she soon recovered, and she would persist in going home, though I tried to persuade her to wait until you returned. But she would not listen to it, and went away with Ludlow in a dreadful state of mind; he thinks he made her take the drive too soon, and is frightfully penitent."

"Well but, Arthur," said Annie, seriously and anxiously, "I suppose he did. It must have been that which knocked her up. She has no mother or

sister with her, you know, to tell her about these things."

"My dear Annie," said Lord Caterham, "she has a doctor and a nurse, I suppose; and she has common-sense, and knows how she feels, herself — does she not? She looked perfectly well when she came in, and handsomer than when I saw her before — and I don't believe the drive had any thing to do with the fainting-fit."

Miss Maurice looked at Lord Caterham in great surprise. His manner and tone were serious, and her feelings, easily roused when her old friend was concerned, were excited now to apprehension. She left off arranging the roses; she dried her finger-tips on her handkerchief, and placing a chair close beside Caterham's couch, she sat down and asked him anxiously to explain his meaning.

"I can't do that very well, Annie," he said, "for I am not certain of what it is; but of this I am certain, my first impression of Mrs. Ludlow is correct. There is something wrong about her, and Ludlow is ignorant of it. All I said to you that day, is more fully confirmed in my mind now. There is some dark secret in the past of her life, and the secret in the present is, that she lives in that past, and does not love her husband."

"Poor Geoffrey," said Annie, in whose eyes tears were standing — "poor Geoffrey, and how dearly he loves her!"

"Yes," said Lord Caterham, "that's the worst of it; that, and his unsuspiciousness, — he does not see what the most casual visitor to their house

sees; he does not perceive the weariness of spirit that is the first thing, next to her beauty, which every one with common perception must recognise. She takes no pains — she does not make the least attempt to hide it. Why, to-day, when she recovered, when her eyes opened — such gloomy eyes they were! — and Ludlow was kneeling here," — he pointed down beside the couch he lay on — "bending over her, — did she look up at him? — did she meet the gaze fixed on her and smile, or try to smile, to comfort and reassure him? Not she: I was watching her; she just opened her eyes and let them wander round, turned her head from him, and let it fall against the side of the couch as if she never cared to lift it more."

"Poor Geoffrey!" said Annie again; this time with a sob.

"Yes, indeed, Annie," he went on; "I pity him, as much as I mistrust her. He has never told you any thing about her antecedents, has he? — and I suppose she has not been more communicative?"

"No," replied Annie; "I know nothing more than I have told you. She has always been the same when I have seen her — trying, I thought, to seem and be happier than at first, but very languid still. Geoffrey said sometimes that she was rather out of spirits, but he seemed to think it was only delicate health — and I hoped so too, though I could not help fearing you were right in all you said that day. O, Arthur, isn't it hard to think of Geoffrey loving her so much, and working so hard, and getting so poor a return?"

"It is indeed, Annie," said Lord Caterham, with a strange wistful look at her; "it is very hard. But I fear there are harder things than that in store for Ludlow. He is not conscious of the extent of his misfortune, if even he knows of its existence at all. I fear the time is coming when he must know all there is to be known, whatever it may be. That woman has a terrible secret in her life, Annie, and the desperate weariness within her — how she let it show when she was recovering from the swoon! — will force it into the light of day before long. Her dreary quietude is the calm before the storm."

"I suppose I had better write this evening and inquire for her," said Annie, after a pause; "and propose to call on her. It will gratify Geoffrey."

"Do so," said Lord Caterham; "I will write to Ludlow myself."

Annie wrote her kind little letter, and duly received a reply. Mrs. Ludlow was much better, but still rather weak, and did not feel quite able to receive Miss Maurice's kindly-proffered visit just at present.

"I am very glad indeed of that, Annie," said Lord Caterham, to whom she showed the note; "you cannot possibly do Ludlow any good, my child; and something tells me that the less you see of her the better."

For some days following that on which the incident and the conversation just recorded took place, Lord Caterham was unable to make his intended request to Geoffrey Ludlow that the latter would call

upon him, that they might renew their interrupted conversation. One of those crises in the long struggle which he maintained with disease and pain, in which entire prostration produced a kind of truce, had come upon him; and silence, complete inaction, and almost a suspension of his faculties, marked its duration. The few members of the household who had access to him were familiar with this phase of his condition; and on this occasion it attracted no more notice than usual, except from Annie, who remarked additional gravity in the manner of the physician, and who perceived that the state of exhaustion of the patient lasted longer, and when he rallied was succeeded by less complete restoration to even his customary condition than before. She mentioned these results of her close observation to Lady Beauport; but the countess paid very little attention to the matter, assuring Annie that she knew Caterham much too well to be frightened; that he would do very well if there were no particular fuss made about him; and that all doctors were alarmists, and said dreadful things to increase their own importance. Annie would have called her attention to the extenuating circumstance that Lord Caterham's medical attendant had not said any thing at all, and that she had merely interpreted his looks; but Lady Beauport was so anxious to tell her something illustrative of "poor Lionel's" beauty, grace, daring, or dash — no matter which or what — that Annie found it impossible to get in another word.

A day or two later, when Lord Caterham had rallied a good deal, and was able to listen to Annie

as she read to him, and while she was so engaged, and he was looking at her with the concentrated earnestness she remarked so frequently in his gaze of late, — Algy Barford was announced. Algy had been constantly at the house to inquire for Lord Caterham; but to-day Stephens had felt sure his master would be able and glad to see Algy. Every body liked that genial soul, and servants in particular — a wonderful test of popularity and its desert. He came in very quietly, and he and Annie exchanged greetings cordially. She liked him also. After he had spoken cheerily to Caterham, and called him "dear old boy" at least a dozen times in as many sentences, the conversation was chiefly maintained between him and Miss Maurice. She did not think much talking would do for Arthur just then, and she made no movement towards leaving the room, as was her usual custom. Algy was a little subdued in tone and spirits: it was impossible even to him to avoid seeing that Caterham was looking much more worn and pale than usual; and he was a bad hand at disguising a painful impression, so that he was less fluent and discursive than was his wont, and decidedly ill at ease.

"How is your painting getting on, Miss Maurice?" he said, when a pause became portentous.

"She has been neglecting it in my favour," said Lord Caterham. "She has not even finished the portrait you admired so much, Algy."

"O! — ah! — 'The Muse of Painting,' wasn't it? It is a pity not to finish it, Miss Maurice. I think you would never succeed better than in that case, — you admire the original so much."

"Yes," said Annie, with rather an uneasy glance towards Caterham, "she is really beautiful. Arthur thinks her quite as wonderful as I do; but I have not seen her lately — she has been ill. By the bye, Arthur, Geoffrey Ludlow wrote to me yesterday inquiring for you; and only think what he says! — 'I hope my wife's illness did not upset Lord Caterham; but I am afraid it did.'" Annie had taken a note from the pocket of her apron, and read these words in a laughing voice.

"Hopes his wife's illness did not upset Lord Caterham!" repeated Algy Barford in a tone of whimsical amazement. "What may that mean, dear old boy? Why are you supposed to be upset by the peerless lady of the unspeakable eyes and the unapproachable hair?"

Annie laughed, and Caterham smiled as he replied, "Only because Mrs. Ludlow fainted here in this room very suddenly, and very 'dead,' one day lately; and as Mrs. Ludlow's fainting was a terrible shock to Ludlow, he concludes that it was also a terrible shock to me, — that's all."

"Well, but," said Algy, apparently seized with an unaccountable access of curiosity, "why did Mrs. Ludlow faint? and what brought her here to faint in your room?"

"It was inconsiderate, I confess," said Caterham, still smiling; "but I don't think she meant it. The fact is, I had asked Ludlow to come and see me; and he brought his wife; and — and she has not been well, and the drive was too much for her, I suppose. At all events, Ludlow and I were talking,

and not minding her particularly, when she said something to me, and I turned round and saw her looking deadly pale, and before I could answer her she fainted."

"Right off?" asked Algy, with an expression of dismay so ludicrous that Annie could not resist it, and laughed outright.

"Right off, indeed," answered Caterham; "down went the photograph-book on the floor, and down she would have gone if Ludlow had been a second later, or an inch farther away! Yes; it was a desperate case, I assure you. How glad you must feel that you wer'n't here, Algy, — eh? What would you have done now? Resorted to the bellows, like the Artful Dodger, or twisted her thumbs, according to the famous prescription of Mrs. Gamp?"

But Algy did not laugh, much to Lord Caterham's amusement, who believed him to be overwhelmed by the horrid picture his imagination conjured up of the position of the two gentlemen under the circumstances.

"But," said Algy, with perfect gravity, "why did she faint? What did she say? People don't tumble down in a dead faint because they're a little tired, dear old boy — do they?"

"Perhaps not in general, Algy, but it looks like it in Mrs. Ludlow's case. All I can tell you is, that the faint was perfectly genuine and particularly 'dead,' and that there was no cause for it, beyond the drive and the fatigue of looking over the photographs in that book. I am very tired of photographs

myself, and I suppose most people are the same, but I haven't quite come to fainting over them yet."

Algy Barford's stupefaction had quite a rousing effect on Lord Caterham, and Annie Maurice liked him and his odd ways more than ever. He made some trifling remark in reply to Caterham's speech, and took an early opportunity of minutely inspecting the photograph-book which he had mentioned.

"So," said Algy to himself, as he walked slowly down St. Barnabas Square; "she goes to see Caterham, and faints at sight of dear old Lionel's portrait, does she? Ah, it's all coming out, Algy; and the best thing you can do, on the whole, is to keep your own counsel, — that's about it, dear old boy!"

CHAPTER XII.

Gathering Clouds.

"My younger brother Lionel Brakespere;" those were Lord Caterham's words. Margaret had heard them distinctly before consciousness left her; there was no mistake, no confusion in her mind, — "my younger brother Lionel Brakespere." All unconsciously, then, she had been for months acquainted and in occasional communication with *his* nearest relatives! Only that day she had been in the house where he had lived; had sat in a room all the associations of which were doubtless familiar to him; had gazed upon the portrait of that face for the sight of which her heart yearned with such a desperate restless longing!

Lord Caterham's brother! Brother to that poor sickly cripple, in whom life's flame seemed not to shine, but to flicker merely, — her Lionel, so bright and active and handsome! Son of that proud, haughty Lady Beauport — yes, she could understand that; it was from his mother that he inherited the cool bearing, the easy assurance, the never-absent *hauteur* which rendered him conspicuous even in a set of men where all these qualities were prized and imitated. She had not had the smallest suspicion the name she had known him by was assumed, or that he had an earl for his father and a viscount

for his brother. He had been accustomed to speak of "the governor — a good old boy;" but his mother and his brother he never mentioned.

They knew him there, knew him as she had never known him — free, unrestrained, without that mask which, to a certain extent, he had necessarily worn in her presence. In his intercourse with them he had been untrammelled, with no lurking fear of what might happen some day; no dodging demon at his side suggesting the end, the separation that he knew must unavoidably come. And she had sat by, ignorant of all that was consuming their hearts' cores, which, had she been able to discuss it with them, would have proved to be her own deepest, most cherished, most pertinacious source of thought. They? — who were they? How many of them had known her Lionel? — how many of them had cared for him? Lady Beauport and Lord Caterham, of course — but of the others? Geoffrey himself had never known him. No; thank God for that! The comparison between her old lover and her husband which she had so often drawn in her own mind had never, could never have occurred to him. Geoffrey's only connection with the Beauport family had been through Annie Maurice. Ah! Annie Maurice! — the heiress now, whose sudden acquisition of wealth and position they were all talking of, — she had not seen Lionel in the old days; and even if she had, it had been slight matter. But Margaret's knowledge of the world was wide and ample, and it needed very little experience — far less indeed than she had had — to show her what might have been

the effect had those two met under the existent different circumstances.

For Margaret knew Lionel Brakespere, and read him like a book. All her wild infatuation about him, — and her infatuation about him was wilder, madder than it had ever been before, — all the length of time since she lost him, — all the long, weary, deadening separation, had not had the smallest effect on her calm matured judgment. She knew that he was at heart a scoundrel; she knew that he had no stability of heart, no depth of affection. Had not her own experience of him taught her that? had not the easy, indifferent, heartless way in which he had slipped out of her knotted arms, leaving her to pine and fret and die, for all he cared, shown her that? She had a thorough appreciation of his worship of the rising sun, — she knew how perfectly he would have sold himself for wealth and position; and yet she loved him, loved him through all!

This was her one consolation in the thought of his absence — his exile. Had he been in England, how readily would he have fallen into those machinations which she guessed his mother would have been only too ready to plot! She knew he was thousands of miles away; and the thought that she was freed from rivalry in a great measure reconciled her to his absence. She could hold him in her heart of hearts as her own only love; there was no one, in her thoughts, to dispute her power over him. He was hers, — hers alone. And he had obtained an additional interest in her eyes since she had discovered his identity. Now she would cultivate that

acquaintance with his people, — all unknowingly she should be able to ally herself more closely to him. Casual questions would bring direct answers — all bearing on the topic nearest her heart: without in the smallest degree betraying her own secret, she would be able to feed her own love-flame, — to hear of, to talk of him for whom every pulse of her heart throbbed and yearned.

Did it never occur to her to catechise that heart, to endeavour to portray vividly to herself the abyss on the brink of which she was standing, — to ask herself whether she was prepared to abnegate all sense of gratitude and duty, and to persevere in the course which — not recklessly, not in a moment of passion, but calmly and unswervingly — she had begun to tread? Yes; she had catechised herself often, had ruthlessly probed her own heart, had acknowledged her baseness and ingratitude, yet had found it impossible to struggle against the pervading thrall. Worse than all, the sight of the man to whom she owed every thing — comfort, respectability, almost life itself, — the sight of him patiently labouring for her sake had become oppressive to her; from calmly suffering it, she had come to loathe and rebel against it. Ah, what a contrast between the present dull, dreary, weary round and the bright old days of the past! To her, and to her alone, was the time then dedicated. She would not then have been left to sit alone, occupying her time as best she might, but every instant would have been devoted to her; and let come what might on the morrow, that time would have been spent in gaiety.

Was there no element of rest in the new era of her life? Did not the child which lay upon her bosom bring some alleviating influence, some new sphere for the absorption of her energies, some new hope, in the indulgence in which she might have found at least temporary forgetfulness of self? Alas, none! She had accepted her maternity as she had accepted her wifehood, — calmly, quietly, without even a pretence of that delicious folly, that pardonable self-satisfaction, that silly, lovable, incontrovertible, charming pride which nearly always accompanies the first experience of motherhood. Old Geoff was mad about his first-born — would leave his easel and come crooning and peering up into the nursery, — would enter that sacred domain in a half-sheepish manner, as though acknowledging his intrusion, but on the score of parental love hoping for forgiveness, — would say a few words of politeness to the nurse, who, inexorable to most men, was won over by his genuine devotion and his evident humility, — would take up the precious bundle, at length confided to him, in the awkwardest manner, and would sit chirrupping to the little putty face, or swing the shapeless mass to and fro, singing meanwhile the dismallest of apparently Indian dirges, and all the while be experiencing the most acute enjoyment. Geoff was by nature a heavy sleeper; but the slightest cry of the child in the adjoining chamber would rouse him; the inevitable infantile maladies expressed in the inevitable peevish whine, so marvellously imitated by the toy-baby manufacturers, would fill him with horror and fright, causing

him to lie awake in an agony of suspense, resting on his elbow and listening with nervous anxiety for their cessation or their increase; while Margaret, wearied out in mental anxiety, either slept tranquilly by his side or remained awake, her eyes closed, her mind abstracted from all that was going on around her, painfully occupied with retrospect of the past or anticipation of the future. She did not care for her baby? No — plainly no! She accepted its existence as she had accepted the other necessary corollaries of her marriage; but the grand secret of maternal love was as far removed from her as though she had never suffered her travail and brought a man-child into the world. That she would do her duty by her baby she had determined, — much in the same spirit that she had decided upon the strict performance of her conjugal duty; but no question of love influenced her. She did not dislike the child, — she was willing to give herself up to the inconveniences which its nurture, its care, its necessities occasioned her; but that was all.

If Margaret did not "make a fuss" with the child, there were plenty who did; numberless people to come and call; numberless eyes to watch all that happened, to note the *insouciance* which existed instead of the solicitude which should have prevailed; numberless tongues to talk and chatter and gossip, — to express wonderment, to declare that their owners "had never seen the like," and so on. Little Dr. Brandram found it more difficult than ever to get away from his lady patients. After all their own disorders had been discussed and remedies sug-

gested, the conversation was immediately turned to his patient at Elm Lodge; and the little medico had to endure and answer a sharp fire of questions of all kinds. Was it really a fine child? and was it true that Mrs. Ludlow did not care about it? She was nursing it herself; yes: that proved nothing; every decent woman would do that, rather than have one of those dreadful creatures in the house — pints of porter every hour, and doing nothing but sit down and abuse every one, and wanting so much waiting on, as though they were duchesses. But *was* it true? Now, doctor, you must know all these stories about her not caring for the child? Caring! — well, you ought to know, with all your experience, what the phrase meant. People would talk, you know, and that was what they said; and all the doctor's other patients wanted to know was whether it was really true. He did his best, the little doctor — for he was a kindly-hearted little creature, and Margaret's beauty had had its usual effect upon him, — he did his best to endow the facts with a roseate hue; but he had a hard struggle, and only partially succeeded. If there was one thing on which the ladies of Lowbar prided themselves, it was on their fulfilment of their maternal duties; if there was one bond of union between them, it was a sort of tacitly-recognised consent to talk of and listen to each other's discussion of their children, either in existence or in prospect. It was noticed now that Margaret had always shirked this inviting subject; and it was generally agreed that it was no wonder, since common report averred that she had no pride in her first-

born. A healthy child too, according to Dr. Brandram — a fine healthy well-formed child. Why, even poor Mrs. Ricketts, whose baby had spinal complaint, loved it, and made the most of it; and Mrs. Moule, whose little Sarah had been blind from her birth, thought her offspring unmatchable in the village, and nursed and tended it night and day. No wonder that in a colony where these sentiments prevailed, Margaret's reputation, hardly won, was speedily on the decline. It may be easily imagined too that to old Mrs. Ludlow's observant eyes Margaret's want of affection for her child did not pass unnoticed. By no one was the child's advent into the world more anxiously expected than by its grandmother, who indeed looked forward to deriving an increased social status from the event, and who had already discussed it with her most intimate friends. Mrs. Ludlow had been prepared for a great contest for supremacy when the child was born — a period at which she intended to assert her right of taking possession of her son's house and remaining its mistress until her daughter-in-law was able to resume her position. She had expected that in this act she would have received all the passive opposition of which Margaret was capable — opposition with which Geoff, being indoctrinated, might have been in a great measure successful. But, to her intense surprise, no opposition was made. Margaret received the announcement of Mrs. Ludlow's intended visit and Mrs. Ludlow's actual arrival with perfect unconcern; and after her baby had been born, and she had bestowed on it a very calm kiss, she suffered it to be removed

by her mother-in-law with an expression which told even more of satisfaction than resignation. This behaviour was so far different from any thing Mrs. Ludlow had expected, that the old lady did not know what to make of it; and her daughter-in-law's subsequent conduct increased her astonishment. This astonishment she at first tried to keep to herself; but that was impossible. The feeling gradually vented itself in sniffs and starts, in eye-brow-upliftings for the edification of the nurse, in suggestive exclamations of "Well, my dear?" and "Don't you think, my love?" and such old-lady phraseology. Further than these little ebullitions Mrs. Ludlow made no sign until her daughter came to see her; and then she could no longer contain herself, but spoke out roundly.

"What it is, my dear, I can't tell for the life of me; but there's something the matter with Margaret. She takes no more notice of the child than if it were a chair or a table; — just a kiss, and how do you do? and nothing more."

"It's because this is her first child, mother. She's strange to it, you know, and —"

"Strange to it, my dear! Nonsense! Nothing of the sort. You're a young girl, and can't understand these things. But not only that, — one would think, at such a time, she would be more than ever fond of her husband. I'm sure when Geoff was born I put up with more from your father than ever I did before or since. His 'gander-month,' he called it; and he used to go gandering about with a parcel of fellows, and come home at all hours of the night

— I used to hear him, though he did creep upstairs with his boots off — but he never had a cross word or look from me."

"Well, but surely, mother, Geoff has not had either cross words or cross looks from Margaret?"

"How provoking you are, Matilda! That seems to be my fate, that no one can understand me. I never said he had, did I? though it would be a good thing for him if he had, poor fellow, I should say — any thing better than what he has to endure now."

"Don't be angry at my worrying you, dear mother; but for Heaven's sake tell me what you mean — what Geoff has to endure?"

"I am not angry, Til; though it seems to be my luck to be imagined angry when there's nothing further from my thoughts. I'm not angry, my dear — not in the least."

"What about Geoff, mother?"

"O, my dear, that's enough to make one's blood boil! I've never said a word to you before about this, Matilda — being one of those persons who keep pretty much to themselves, though I see a great deal more than people think for, — I've never said a word to you before about this; for, as I said to myself, what good could it do? But I'm perfectly certain that there's something wrong with Margaret."

"How do you mean, mother? Something wrong! — is she ill?"

"Now, my dear Matilda, as though a woman would be likely to be well when she's just had —— Bless my soul, the young women of the present day

are very silly! I wasn't speaking of her health, of course."

"Of what then, mother?" said Til, with resignation.

"Well, then, my dear, haven't you noticed, — but I suppose not: no one appears to notice these things in the way that I do, — but you might have noticed that for the last few weeks Margaret has seemed full of thought, dreamy, and not caring for any thing that went on. If I've pointed out once to her about the mite of a cap that that Harriet wears, and all her hair flying about her ears, and a crinoline as wide as wide, I've spoken a dozen times; but she's taken no notice; and now the girl sets me at defiance, and tells me I'm not her mistress, and never shall be! That's one thing; but there are plenty of others. I was sure Geoffrey's linen could not be properly aired — the colds he caught were so awful; and I spoke to Margaret about it, but she took no notice; and yesterday, when the clothes came home from the laundress, I felt them myself, and you might have wrung the water out of them in pints. There are many other little things too that I've noticed; and I'll tell you what it is, Matilda — I'm certain she has got something on her mind."

"O, I hope not, poor girl, poor dear Margaret!"

"Poor dear fiddlestick! What nonsense you talk, Matilda! If there's any one to be pitied, it's Geoffrey, I should say; though what he could have expected, taking a girl for his wife that he'd known so little of, and not having any wedding-breakfast, or any thing regular, I don't know!"

"But why is Geoffrey to be pitied, mother?"

"Why? Why, because his wife doesn't love him, my dear! Now you know it!"

"O, mother, for Heaven's sake don't say such a thing! You know you're — you won't mind what I say, dearest mother, — but you're a little apt to jump at conclusions, and —"

"O yes, I know, my dear; I know I'm a perfect fool! — I know that well enough; and if I don't, it's not for want of being reminded of it by my own daughter. But I know I'm right in what I say; and what's more, my son shall know it before long."

"O, mother, you would never tell Geoff! — you would never —"

"If a man's eyes are not open naturally, my dear, they must be opened for him. I shall tell Geoffrey my opinion about his wife; and let him know it in pretty plain terms, I can tell you!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Mr. Stompff's Doubts.

It is not to be supposed that because Geoffrey Ludlow's married life offered no very striking points for criticism, it was left uncriticised by his friends. Those, be they married or single, quiet or boisterous, convivial or misanthropical, who do not receive discussion at the hands of their acquaintance, are very few in number. There can be nothing more charmingly delightful, nothing more characteristic of this chivalrous age, than the manner in which friends speak of each other behind, as the phrase goes, "each other's backs." To two sets of people, having a third for common acquaintance, this pastime affords almost inexpressible delight, more especially if the two sets present have been made acquainted with each other through the medium of the absent third. It is rather dangerous ground at first, because neither of the two sets present can tell whether the other may not have some absurd scruples as to the propriety of canvassing the merits or demerits of their absent friend; but a little tact, a little cautious dealing with the subject, a few advances made as tentatively as those of the elephant on the timber-bridge, soon show that the discussion will not be merely endured, but will be heartily welcome; and straightway it is plunged into with the deepest interest.

How they manage to keep that carriage, — that's what we've always wanted to know! O, you've noticed it too. Well, is it rouge or enamel, or what? That's what I've always said to George — how that poor man can go on slaving and slaving as he does, and all the money going in finery for her, is what I can't understand! What a compliment to our opinion of our powers of character-reading to find all our notions indorsed by others, more especially when those notions have been derogatory to those with whom we have for some time been living on terms of intimacy! To be sure there is another side to the medal, when we find that those who have known our dear absents a much shorter time than we have, claim credit for being far more sharpsighted than we. They marked at once, they say, all the shortcomings which we had taken so long to discover; and they lead the chorus of depreciation, in which we only take inferior parts.

It was not often that Mr. Stompff busied himself with the domestic concerns of the artists who formed his staff. It was generally quite enough for him provided they "came up to time," as he called it, did their work well, and did not want too much money in advance. But in Geoffrey Ludlow Mr. Stompff took a special interest, regarding him as a man out of whom, if properly worked, great profit and fame were to be made. He had paid several visits to Elm Lodge, ostensibly for the purpose of seeing how the Brighton-Esplanade picture was progressing; but with this he combined the opportunity of inspecting the domestic arrangements, and noting

whether they were such as were likely to "suit his book." No man more readily understood the dispiriting influence of a slattern wife or a disorderly home upon the work that was to be done.

"I've seen 'em," he used to say, "chockfull of promise, and all go to the bad just because of cold meat for dinner, or the house full of steam on washing-days. They'd rush away, and go off — public-house or any where — and then good-bye to my work and the money they've had of me! What I like best 's a regular expensive woman, — fond of her dress and going about, and all that, — who makes a man stick to it to keep her going. That's when you get the work out of a cove. So I'll just look-up Ludlow, and see how he's goin' on."

He did "look-up" Ludlow several times; and his sharp eyes soon discovered a great deal of which he did not approve, and which did not seem likely to coincide with his notions of business. He had taken a dislike to Margaret the first time he had seen her, and his dislike increased on each subsequent visit. There was something about her which he could scarcely explain to himself, — a "cold stand-offishness," he phrased it, — which he hated. Margaret thought Mr. Stompff simply detestable, and spite of Geoff's half-hints, took no pains to disguise her feelings. Not that she was ever demonstrative — it was her calm quiet *insouciance* that roused Mr. Stompff's wrath. "I can't tell what to make of that woman," he would say; "she never gives Ludlow a word of encouragement, but sits there yea-nay, by G—, lookin' as though she didn't know he was

grindin' his fingers off to earn money for her! She don't seem to take any notice of what's goin' on; but sits moonin' there, lookin' straight before her, and treatin' me and her husband as if we was dirt! Who's she, I should like to know, to give herself airs and graces like that? It was all very well when Ludlow wanted a model for that Skyllar picture; but there's no occasion for a man to marry his models, that I've heard of — leastways it ain't generally done. She don't seem to know that it's from me all the money comes, by the way she treats me. She don't seem to think that that pretty house and furniture, and all the nice things which she has, are paid for by my money. She's never a decent word to say to me. Damme, I hate her!"

And Mr. Stompff did not content himself by exploding in this manner. He let off this safety-valve of self-communion to keep himself from boiling over; but all the cause for his wrath still remained, and he referred to it, mentally, not unfrequently. He knew that Geoffrey Ludlow was one of his greatest cards; he knew that he had obtained a certain mastery over him at a very cheap rate; but he also knew that Ludlow was a man impressible to the highest degree, and that if he were preoccupied or annoyed, say by domestic trouble for instance — and there was nothing in a man of Geoffrey's temperament more destructive to work than domestic trouble — he would be incapable of earning his money properly. Why should there be domestic trouble at Elm Lodge? Mr. Stompff had his ears wider open than most men, and had heard a certain something

which had been rumoured about at the time of Geoff's marriage; but he had not paid much attention to it. There were many *ateliers* which he was in the habit of frequenting, — and the occupants of which turned out capital pictures for him, — where he saw ladies playing the hostess's part whose names had probably never appeared in a marriage-register; but that was nothing to him. Most of them accepted Mr. Stompff's compliments, and made themselves agreeable to the great *entrepreneur*, and laughed at his coarse story and his full-flavoured joke, and were only too delighted to get them, in conjunction with his cheque. But this wife of Ludlow's was a woman of a totally different stamp; and her treatment of him so worried Mr. Stompff that he determined to find out more about her. Charley Potts was the most intimate friend of Ludlow's available to Mr. Stompff, and to Charley Potts Mr. Stompff determined to go.

It chanced that on the morning which the great picture-dealer had selected to pay his visit, Mr. Bowker had strolled into Charley Potts's rooms, and found their proprietor hard at work. Mr. Bowker's object, though prompted by very different motives from those of Mr. Stompff, was identically the same. Old William had heard some of those irrepressible rumours which, originating no one knows how, gather force and strength from circulation, and had come to talk to Mr. Potts about them. "Dora in the Cornfield" had progressed so admirably since Bowker's last visit, that after filling his pipe he stood motionless before it, with the unlighted lucifer in his hand.

"'Pon my soul, I think you'll do something some day, young 'un!" were his cheering words. "That's the real thing! Wonderful improvement since I saw it; got rid of the hay-headed child, and come out no end. Don't think the sunlight's *quite* that colour, is it? and perhaps no reason why those reaping-parties shouldn't have noses and mouths as well as eyes and chins. Don't try scamping, Charley, — you're not big enough for that; wait till you're made an R.A., and the critics will point out the beauties of your outline; at present you must copy nature. And now" — lighting his pipe — "how are you?"

"O, I'm all right, William," responded Mr. Potts; "all right, and working like any number of steam-engines. Orson, sir — if I may so describe myself — Orson is endowed with reason. Orson has begun to find out that life is different from what he imagined, and has gone in for something different."

"Ha!" said old Bowker, eyeing the young man kindly as he puffed at his pipe; "it's not very difficult to discover what's up now, then."

"O, I don't want to make any mystery about it," said Charley. "The simple fact is, that having seen the folly of what is called a life of pleasure —"

"At thirty years of age!" interrupted Bowker.

"Well, what then? — at thirty years of age! One does not want to be a Methuselah like you before one discovers the vanity, the emptiness, the heartlessness of life."

"Of course not, Charley!" said Bowker, greatly delighted. "Go on!"

"And I intend to — to — to cut it, Bowker, and go in for something better. It's something, sir, to have something to work for. I have an end in view, to —"

"Well, but you've always had that. I thought that your ideas were concentrated on being President of the Academy, and returning thanks for your health, proposed by the Prime Minister."

"Bowker, you are a ribald. No, sir; there is a spur to my ambition far beyond the flabby presidentship of that collection of dreary old parties —"

"Yes, I know; and the spur is marked with the initials M. L. That it, Master Charley?"

"It may be, Bowker, and it may be not. Meanwhile, my newly-formed but unalterable resolutions do not forbid the discussion of malt-liquor, and Caroline yet understands the signal-code."

With these words, Mr. Potts proceeded to make his ordinary pantomimic demonstration at the window and, when the beer arrived, condescended to give up work for a time; and, lighting a pipe and seating himself in his easy-chair, he entered into conversation with his friend.

"And suppose the spur were marked with M. L.," said he, reverting to the former topic, after a little desultory conversation, — "suppose the spur were marked with M. L., what would be the harm of that, Bowker?"

"Harm!" growled old Bowker; "you don't imagine when you begin to speak seriously of such a thing that I, of all people, should say there was any harm in it? I thought you were chaffing at first,

and so I chaffed; but I'm about the last man in the world to dissuade a young fellow with the intention and the power to work from settling himself in life with a girl such as I know this one to be. So far as I have seen of her, she has all our Geoff's sweetness of disposition combined with an amount of common-sense and knowledge of the world which Geoff never had and never will have."

"She's A 1, old boy, and that's all about it; but we're going a-head rather too quickly. I've not said a word to her yet, and I scarcely know whether —"

"Nonsense, Charley! A man who is worth any thing knows right well whether a woman cares for him or not; and knows in what way she cares for him too. On this point I go back to my old ground again, and say that Geoffrey Ludlow's sister could not be dishonest enough to flirt and flatter and play the deuce with a man. There's too much honesty about the family; and you would be in a very different state of mind, young fellow, if you thought there was any doubt as to how your remarks would be received in that quarter, when you chose to speak."

Mr. Potts smiled, and pulled his moustache, triumphantly now, not doubtfully as was his wont. Then his face settled into seriousness, as he said:

"You're right, William, I think. I hope so, please God! I've never said so much as this to any one, as you may guess; but I love that girl with all my heart and soul, and if only the dealers will stick by me, I intend to tell her that same very shortly.

But what you just said has turned my thoughts into another channel — our Geoff."

"Well, what about our Geoff?" asked Mr. Bowker, twisting round on his seat, and looking hard at his friend.

"You must have noticed, Bowker — probably much more than I have, for you're more accustomed to that sort of thing — that our Geoff's not right lately. There's something wrong up there at Elm Lodge, that I can't make out, — that I daren't think of. You remember our talks both before and after Geoff's marriage? Well, I must hark back upon them. He's not happy, William — there, you have the long and the short of it! I'm a bad hand at explaining these matters, but Geoff's not happy. He's made a mistake; and though I don't think he sees it himself — or if he does, he would die sooner than own it — there can be no doubt about it. Mrs. Ludlow does not understand, — does not appreciate him; and our Geoff's no more like our crony of old days than I'm like Raffaelle. There, that's it as clear as I can put it!"

Bowker waited for an instant, and then he said:

"I've tried hard enough, God knows! — hard enough to prevent myself from thinking as you think, Charley; but all to no purpose. There is a cloud over Geoff's life, and I fear it springs from — Some one knocking. Keep 'em out, if possible; we don't want any one boring in here just now."

But the knocker, whoever he was, seemed by no means inclined to be kept out. He not only obeyed the regular directions and "tugged the trotter," but

he afterwards gave three distinct and loud raps with his fist on the door, which was the signal to the initiated; and when the door was opened and the knocker appeared in the person of Mr. Stompff, further resistance was useless.

The great man entered the room with a light and airy step and a light and airy address. "Well, Charley, how are you? Come to give you a look-up, you see. Hallo! who's this? — Mr. Bowker, how do you do, sir?" in a tone which meant, "What the devil do you do here?" — "how are you, sir? — Well, Charley, what are you at? Going to the bad, you villain, — going to the bad!"

"Not quite that, I hope, Mr. Stompff —"

"'Working for Caniche, eh? That's the same thing, just the same thing! I've heard all about it. You've let that miserable Belgian get hold of you, eh? This is it, is it? Gal in a cornfield and mowers? what you call 'em — reapers? That's it! reapers, and a little child. Some story, eh? O, ah! Tennyson; I don't know him — not bad, by Jove! not half bad! it's Caniche's?"

"Yes; that's Caniche's commission."

"Give you fifty more than he's given to make it over to me. You won't, of course not, you silly feller! it's only my joke. But look here, mind you give me the refusal of the next. I can do better for you than Caniche. He's a poor paltry chap. I go in for great things, — that's my way, Mr. Bowker."

"Is it?" growled old William over his pipe; "then you go in also for great pay, Mr. Stompff, I suppose?"

"Ask your friend Ludlow about that. He'll tell you whether I pay handsomely or not, sir. — By the way, how is your friend Ludlow, Potts?"

"He's all right, I believe."

"And his wife, how's she?"

There was something in his tone and in the expression of his eyes which made Mr. Potts say:

"Mrs. Ludlow is going on very well, I believe," in a tone of seriousness very unusual with Charley.

"That's all right," said Mr. Stompff. "Going on very well, eh? Every body will be glad to hear that, and Ludlow in partickler. Going on very well — in a regular domestic quiet manner, eh? That's all right. Hasn't been much used to the domestic style before her marriage, I should think, eh?"

"Whatever you may think, I should advise you not to say much, Mr. Stompff," said Bowker. "I don't think Geoff would much like hearing those things said of his wife; I'm sure I should not of mine."

"N-no; but you have not a wife; I — I mean living, Mr. Bowker," said Stompff with a sneer.

William Bowker swallowed down a great lump rising in his throat, and forcibly restrained the involuntary clenching of his fists, as he replied, "No, you're right there, Mr. Stompff; but still I repeat my advice."

"O, I shall say nothing. People will talk, you know, whether I'm silent or not, and people will want to know who Mrs. Ludlow was before she married Ludlow, and why she's so silent and preoccupied, and why she never goes into society, and why she

faints away when she looks at photograph-books, and so on. But I didn't come here to talk of Mrs. Ludlow. Now, Potts, *mon brave*, let us discuss business."

When the great man took his departure, after proposing handsome terms to Charley Potts for a three years' engagement, Bowker said: "There's more in what we were saying when that blatant ruffian came in than I thought for, Charley. The news of Geoff's domestic trouble has got wind."

"I'm afraid so. But what did Stompff mean about the fainting and the photograph-book?"

"God knows!" probably an invention and a lie. But when people like Stompff begin to talk in that way, it's bad for those they talk about, depend upon it."

CHAPTER XIV.

Threatening.

Geoffrey Ludlow felt considerable anxiety about his wife after the day of their inauspicious visit to Lord Caterham; and as anxiety was quite a foreign element in Geoff's placid temperament, it did not sit well upon him, and it rendered him idle and desultory. He could not make up his mind as to the true source of his anxiety, — the real spring of his discomfort. Margaret's health was very good; her naturally fine *physique* shook off illness easily and rapidly, and her rare beauty was once more irradiated with the glow of health and strength. Yet Geoffrey's inquietude was not lessened. He loved this strange woman — this woman who compelled admiration, indeed, from others, but won love only from him with passionate and intense devotion. But he was ill at ease with her, and he began to acknowledge to himself that it was so. He knew, he felt, that there was some new element, some impalpable power in their lives, which was putting asunder those who had never been very closely united in real bonds of sympathy and confidence, with an irresistible, remorseless hand, — invisible and sure as that of Death.

There are no words to tell what this good fellow suffered in his kindly, unselfish, simple way, as day by day the conviction forced itself upon him that

the woman he had so loved, the woman for whom he lived, and worked, and thought, and hoped, was more and more divided from him by some barrier — all the more impassable because he could not point to it and demand an explanation of its presence, or utter a plea for its removal. He would sit in his painting-room quite idle, and with a moody brow — unlike the Geoff Ludlow of old times — and think and puzzle himself about his wife; he would sometimes work, in short desultory fits of industry, desperately, as though putting thought from him by main force; and then he would meet Margaret, at meals or other times of association, with so indifferent an assumption of being just as usual, that it was wonderful she did not notice the change in her husband. But Geoffrey did not interest her, and Margaret did not observe him with any curiosity. The state of mind of this ill-assorted pair at this time was very curious, had there been any one to understand and analyse it.

"What can it be?" Geoffrey would ask himself. "I cannot make it out. She does not take any interest in any thing. I thought all women loved their children at least, and the coldest warmed to their infants; but she does not."

Geoffrey had ceased to wonder at Margaret's coldness to him. She had always been cold, and latterly her reserve and silence had increased. She made no effort to hide the *ennui* which wholly possessed her; she made no attempt to simulate the interest in his occupations which she had never felt in more than a lukewarm degree. His perceptions

were not very quick; but when he did see a thing, he was apt to understand and reason upon it, and he reasoned upon this now; he pondered upon it and upon his marriage, and he wondered when he remembered the joy and hope with which he had entered upon the pretty, comfortable new home and the quiet industrious life. What had come to it all? What had changed it, and yet left it the same? He had not failed in any duty to this woman; he had not given her less, but more than he had promised; for he was much better off than he had hoped to be, and she had the command of every shilling he earned. Never had an unkind word, a negligent act, a failure in the tenderest of household kindnesses, recorded itself in her memory against this man, who was her preserver, her protector, her husband. Surprise, trouble, vague apprehension, above all, the bewilderment of inexplicable wrong, were in Geoffrey's mind; but not a touch of bitterness against her. He remembered the story she had told him, and the promise he had pledged to her, and his generous heart rested in the assurance she had then given him, and sought no farther. His was not the nature which would count up the items in the bargain between them, and set down the large balance that really existed on his side. What had he given her? To answer this question aright, knowledge must have been had of her whole life, and all its depths of suffering, of actual physical want sounded; all her love of luxury, all her incapacity to bear privation, all her indolence, her artistic sensuousness, her cultivated power of enjoyment, must have been known and weighed.

He had given her ease, security, respectability, — a name, a home which was comfortable to the verge of luxury, which included all that any woman could reasonably desire who had voluntarily accepted a life upon the scale which it implied — a home to which his industry and his love constantly added new comforts and decorations. Geoffrey never thought of these things, — he did not appraise them; nor did his generous heart dwell upon the sacrifice he had made, the risk he had incurred, in short, upon the extraordinary imprudence of his marriage. His nature was too magnanimous, and not sufficiently practical for such considerations; he thought of nothing but the love he had given her, — the love she did not seem to understand, to care for, — and he wondered, in his simple way, why such love, so deep and quiet, so satisfied with home and her, could not make her more happy and cheerful. Poor Geoffrey, calm and peace were the conditions of life in which alone he could find or imagine happiness, and they were just those which were detestable to Margaret. It is possible that, had she been caught from the depths of her degradation and despair in the grasp of a nature stronger and more violent than her own, the old thrall might have fallen from her, and she might have been swayed by the mingled charm and authority, the fierceness, the delight, the fear of a great passion so preoccupying that she would have had no time for retrospect, so entrancing that she would have been forced to live in the present. But the hand that had raised her from the abyss was only gentle and tender; it lacked the force which would

have wrung submission from her afterwards, the power to imply that it could wound as well as caress, — and its touch had no potency for that perverted nature. What had she given him? Just her beauty, — nothing more. She was his wife, and she cared for him no more than she cared for the furniture of her rooms and the trinkets in her jewel-case (poor things, she thought, which once would have been unworthy of her wearing, but chosen with all Geoff's humble science, and bought with the guerdon of many a day of Geoff's hard work); he was her child's father; and the child bored her a little more unendurably than all the rest. Indeed, all the rest was quiet — which at least was something — but the child was not quiet; and Geoffrey made a fuss about it — a circumstance which lent a touch of impatience to her distaste. He talked about the infant, — he wanted to know if she thought her boy's eyes were like her own? and whether she would like him to be an artist like his father? He talked about the boy's eyes, and Lionel's electric glances were haunting her troubled soul; he babbled about the boy's future, when she was enduring the tortures of Tantalus in her terrible longing for the past.

The child throve, and Geoffrey loved the little creature with a vigilant affection curious and beautiful to see. When he felt that the hopes he had built upon the infant, as a new and strong tie between himself and Margaret, as a fresh source of interest, something to awaken her from her torpidity, were not destined to be realised, he turned, in the intens-

ity of his disappointment and discomfiture, to the child itself, and sought — unconsciously it may be, at least unavowedly to himself — to fill up the void in his heart, to restore the warmth to his home, through the innocent medium of the baby. The child did not resemble his mother, even after the difficult-to-be-discovered fashion of likenesses in baby-hood. When he opened his eyes, in the solemn and deliberate way in which young children look out upon the mysterious world, they did not disclose violet tints nor oval-shaped heavy lids; they were big brown eyes, like Geoffrey's, and the soft rings of downy hair, which the nurse declared to be "the beautifullest curls she ever see on an 'ead at 'is age," were not golden but dark brown. Geoffrey held numerous conferences with the nurse about her charge, and might be found many times in the day making his way with elaborate caution, and the noiseless step which is a characteristic of big men, up the nursery-stair; and seen by the curious, had there been any to come there, gazing at the infant lying in his cradle, or on his nurse's knee, with a wistful rueful expression, and his hands buried in the pockets of his painting-coat.

He never found Margaret in the nursery on any of these occasions, and she never evinced the slightest interest in the nursery government, or responded to any of his ebullitions of feeling on the subject. Of course the servants were not slow to notice the indifference of the mother, and to comment upon it with unreserved severity. Margaret was not a favourite at any time — "master" being perfection in

their minds — and her cold reserve and apathy impressing the domestics, who could not conceive that "a good home" could be despicable in even the most beautiful eyes, very unfavourably.

Margaret was arraigned before the domestic tribunal, unknown to herself; though, had she known it, the circumstance would have made no impression upon her. Her cold pride would at all times have rendered her indifferent to opinion; and now that indifference, weariness, and distaste had entire possession of her, she had not even cared to hide the dreary truth from her husband's mother and sister. What had become of her resolutions with regard to them? Where were her first impulses of gratitude? Gone — sunk in the Dead Sea of her overmastering passion — utterly lost beneath the tide of her conscienceless selfishness. She could not strive, she could not pretend, she could not play any part longer. Why should she, to whom such talk was twaddle of the trashiest description, try to appear interested because she had given birth to Geoffrey's child? Well, there was the child; let them make much of it, and talk nonsense to it and about it. What was Geoffrey's child to her, or Geoffrey's mother, or — she had gone very near to saying Geoffrey himself either, but something dimly resembling a pang of conscience stopped her. He was very good, very honest, very kind; and she was almost sorry for him,—as nearly sorry as she could be for any but herself; and then the tide of that sorrow for herself dashed over and swept all these trifling scraps of vague regret, of perhaps elementary remorse, away on its tumultuous waves.

She was cursed with such keen memory, she was haunted with such a terrible sense of contrast! Had it been more dreadful, more agonising, when she was a wanderer in the pitiless streets, — starving, homeless, dying of sheer want; when the bodily suffering she endured was so great that it benumbed her mind, and deadened it to all but craving for food and shelter? The time of this terrible experience lay so far in the past now, that she had begun to forget the reality of the torture; she had begun to undervalue its intensity, and to think that she had purchased rescue too dear. Too dear! — she, whose glance could not fall around her without resting on some memorial of the love she had won; she, whose daily life was sheltered from every breath of ill and care! She had always been weary; now she was growing enraged. Like the imprisoned creatures of the desert and the jungle, in whom long spells of graceful apathatic repose are succeeded by fierce fits of rebellious struggle, she strove and fought with the gentle merciful fate which had brought her into this pretty prison and supplied her with dainty daily fare. It had all been bearable — at least until now — and she had borne it well, and never turned upon her keeper. But the wind had set from the lands of sun and fragrance, from the desert whose sands were golden, whose wells were the sparkling waters of life and love, and she had scented the old perfume in the breeze. All the former instincts revived, the slight chain of formal uncongenial habit fell away, and in the strength of passion and beauty she rebelled against her fate.

Perhaps the man she loved and longed for, as the sick long for health or the shipwrecked for a sail, had never seen her look so beautiful as she looked one day, when, after Mrs. Ludlow and her daughter, who had come to lunch at Elm Lodge, had gone away, and Geoffrey, puzzled and mortified more than ever, had returned to his painting-room, she stood by the long window of the drawing-room, gazing out over the trim little space which bloomed with flowers and glowed in the sunshine, with eyes which seemed indeed as if their vision cleft distance and disdained space. Her cheeks, usually colourless, were touched with a faint rose-tinge; and the hurry and excitement of her thoughts seemed to pervade her whole frame, which was lighted by the rays of the afternoon sun, from the rich coils of her red-gold hair to the restless foot which tapped the carpet angrily. As she stood, varying expressions flitted over her face like clouds; but in them all there was an intensity new to it, and which would have told an observer that the woman who looked so was taking a resolution.

Suddenly she lifted her hands above her head to the full extent of her arms, then tore the twisted fingers asunder with a moan, as if of pain or hunger, and letting them fall by her side, flung herself into a chair.

"Have you heard any thing of Lord Caterham lately?" asked Mrs. Geoffrey Ludlow of her husband, a few days after his mother's visit, just as Geoffrey, having breakfasted, was about to retire to his painting-room. She asked the question in the most careless possible manner, and without removing her eyes

from the *Times*, which she was reading; but Geoffrey was pleased that she should have asked it at all, — any sign of interest on Margaret's part in any one for whom he cared being still precious to Geoffrey, and becoming rarer and more rare.

"No, dear," he replied; "Annie said she would write as soon as Lord Caterham should be well enough to see me. I suppose I may tell her, then, that she may come and see you. You are quite well now, Margaret?"

"O yes, quite well," she replied; and then added, with the faintest flicker of colour on her cheek, "Lord Caterham's brother is not at home, I believe. Have you ever seen him?"

"Captain Brakespere? No, not I. There's something wrong about him. I don't understand the story, but Annie just mentioned that Lord Caterham had been in great distress about him. Well, Margaret, I'm off now to the Esplanade."

He looked wistfully at her; but she did not speak or lift up her eyes, and he went out of the room.

If there was trouble of the silent and secret kind in Geoffrey's home, there was also discontent of the outspoken sort at his mother's cheerful house in Brompton.

Mrs. Ludlow was wholly unprepared to find that Margaret cared so little for her child. It was with no small indignation that she commented upon Margaret's demeanour, as she and her daughter sat together; and deeper than her indignation lay her anxiety, and a vague apprehension of evil in store for her darling son.

"She is sulky and discontented, — that's what she is," repeated Mrs. Ludlow; "and what she can want or wish for that she has not got passes my comprehension."

Miss Ludlow said that perhaps it was only accidental. She would be sorry to think Margaret had such faults of temper to any confirmed degree. It would be dreadful for dear old Geoff, who was so sweet-tempered himself, and who never could understand unamiable persons. But she added she did not think Geoff perceived it. She was sure he would never think that Margaret was not fond of the child.

"O yes, he does perceive it," said Mrs. Ludlow; "I can see that very plainly; I saw it in his face when he came up to the nursery with us, and she never offered to stir; and did you not notice, Til, that when I asked her what the doctor said about vaccinating baby, she looked at me quite vacantly, and Geoffrey answered? Ah, no; he knows it well enough, poor fellow; and how ever he is to get through life with a woman with a bad temper and no heart, I'm sure I can't tell."

Geoffrey had never relaxed in his attention to his mother. In the early days of his marriage, when he had persuaded himself that there was nothing in the least disappointing in Margaret's manner, and that he was perfectly happy; in those days to which he looked back now, in the chill dread and discomfort of the present, as to vanished hours of Paradise, he had visited his mother, sent her presents, written short cheery notes to her and Til, and done every thing in his power to lessen their sense of the

inevitable separation which his marriage had brought about. His love and his happiness had had no hardening or narrowing effect upon Geoffrey Ludlow. They had quickened his perceptions and added delicacy to his sympathies. But there was a difference now. Geoffrey felt unwilling to see his mother and sister; he felt that their perception of Margaret's conduct had been distinct, and their disapproval complete; and he shrank from an interview which must include avoidance of the subject occupying all their minds. He would not willingly have had Margaret blamed, even by implication, by others; though there was something more like anger than he had ever felt or thought he could feel towards her in his gentle heart, as he yielded to the conviction that she had no love for her child.

Thus it happened that Geoffrey did not see his mother and sister for a week just at this time, during which interval there was no change in the state of affairs at home. He wrote, indeed, to Til, and made cheery mention of the boy and of his picture, which was getting on splendidly, and at which he was working so hard that he could not manage to get so far as Brompton for a day or two yet, but would go very soon; and Margaret sent her love. So Geoffrey made out a letter which might have been written by a blundering schoolboy — a letter over which his mother bent sad and boding looks, and Til had "a good cry." Though Geoffrey had not visited them lately, the ladies had not been altogether deprived of the society of men and artists. The constancy with which Charley Potts paid his

respects was quite remarkable; and it fell out that, seeing Matilda rather out of spirits, and discerning that something was going wrong, Charley very soon extracted from Til what that something was, and they proceeded to exchange confidences on the subject of Geoffrey and his beautiful wife. Charley informed Matilda that none of "our fellows" who had been introduced to Mrs. Geoffrey liked her; and as for Stompff, "he hates her all out, you know," said the plain-spoken Charley; "but I don't mind that, for she's a lady, and Stompff — he — he's a beast, you know."

When Geoffrey could no longer defer a visit to his mother without the risk of bringing about questions and expostulations which must make the state of things at home openly known, and place him in the embarrassing position of being obliged to avow an estrangement for which he could assign no cause, he went to Brompton. The visit was not a pleasant one, though the mother and sister were even more demonstrative in their affectionate greeting than usual, and though they studiously avoided any reference to the subject in their minds and in his. But this was just what he dreaded; they *did* studiously avoid it; and by doing so they confirmed all his suspicions, they realised all his fears. Geoffrey did not even then say to himself that his marriage was a mistake, and his mother and sister had discovered it; but had his thoughts, his misgivings been put into words, they must have taken some such shape. They talked energetically about the child, and asked Geoff all sorts of feminine questions, which it would

have affected a male listener rather oddly to have heard Geoff answer with perfect seriousness, and a thorough acquaintance with details. He had several little bits of news for them; how Mr. Stompff, reminiscent of his rather obtrusive promise, had sent the clumsiest, stumpiest, ugliest lump of a silver mug procurable in London as a present to the child, but had not presented himself at Elm Lodge; how Miss Maurice had been so delighted with the little fellow, and had given him a beautiful embroidered frock, and on Lord Caterham's behalf endowed him with a salver "big enough to serve himself up upon, mother," said Geoff, with his jolly laugh: "I put him on it, and carried him round the room for Annie to see."

Beyond the inevitable inquiries, there was no mention made of Margaret; but when his mother kissed him at parting, and when Til lingered a moment longer than usual, with her arms round his neck, at the door, Geoffrey felt the depth and bitterness of the trouble that had come into his life more keenly, more chillingly than he had felt it yet.

"This shall not last," he said, as he walked slowly towards home, his head bent downwards, and all his features clouded with the gloom that had settled upon him. "This shall not last any longer. I have done all I can; if she is unhappy, it is not my fault; but I must know why. I cannot bear it; I have not deserved it. I will keep silence no longer. She must explain what it means."

CHAPTER XV.

Lady Beauport's Plot Collapses.

ALTHOUGH the flame of life, at its best a feeble flicker, — now brightened by a little gust of hope, now deadened by an access of despair, — had begun steadily to lessen in Lord Caterham's breast, and he felt, with that consciousness which never betrays, that his interest in this world, small as it had been, was daily growing less, he had determined to prevent the execution of one act which he knew would be terribly antagonistic to the welfare of her whom his heart held dearest. We, fighting the daily battle of life, going forth each morning to the encounter, returning each eve with fresh dints on our harness, new notches in our swords, and able to reckon up the cost and the advantages gained by the day's combat, are unable to appreciate the anxieties and heart-burnings, the longings and the patience of those whom we leave behind us as a *corps de réserve*, apparently inactive, but in reality partaking of all the worst of the contest without the excitement of sharing it. The conflict that was raging amongst the Beauport family was patent to Caterham; he saw the positions taken up by the contending parties, had his own shrewd opinion as to their being tenable or the reverse, calmly criticised the various points of strategy, and laid his

plans accordingly. In this it was an advantage to him that he was out of the din and the shouting and the turmoil of the battle; nobody thought of him, any more than any one in the middle of an action thinks of the minister in his office at home, by whom the despatches are written, and who in reality pulls the strings by which the man in scarlet uniform and gold-laced cocked-hat is guided, and to whom he is responsible. Lord Caterham was physically unfitted for the conduct of strategic operations, but he was mentally qualified for the exercise of diplomacy in the highest degree; and diplomacy was required in the present juncture.

In his solitary hours he had been accustomed to recal his past life in its apparently insignificant, but to him important ramifications; — the red south wall is the world to the snail that has never known other resting-place; — and in these days of illness and languor he reverted more and more to his old means of passing the time. A dull retrospect — a weary going over and over again of solitude, depression, and pain. Thoughts long since forgotten recurred to him as in the silence of the night he passed in review the petty incidents of his uneventful career. He recollected the burning shame which had first possessed him at the knowledge of his own deformity; the half envy, half wonder, with which he had gazed at other lads of his own age; the hope that had dawned upon him that his parents and friends might feel for him something of the special love with which Tiny Tim was regarded in that heartfullest of all stories, *The Christmas Carol;* how

that wondrous book had charmed him, when, a boy of ten or twelve years old, he had first read it; how, long before it had been seen by either his father or mother, he had studied and wept over it; how, prompted by a feeling which he could not analyse, he had induced Lord Beauport to read it; how he knew — intuitively, he was never told — that it had been shown to his mother; and how that Christmas-tide he had been treated with consideration and affection never before accorded to him — had been indeed preferred to Lionel, greatly to that young gentleman's astonishment and disgust. It did not last long, that halcyon time; the spells of the romancer held the practical father and the fashionable mother in no lengthened thrall; and when they were dissipated, there was merely a crippled, deformed, blighted lad as their eldest hope and the heir to their honours. Tiny Tim borne aloft on his capering father's shoulders; Tiny Tim in his grave, — these were images to wring the heart not unpleasantly, and to fill the eyes with tears of which one was rather proud, as proof of how easily the heart was wrung: but for a handsome couple — one known as a *beau garçon*, the other as a beauty — to have to face the stern fact that their eldest son was a cripple was any thing but agreeable.

Untrusted — that was it. Never from his earliest days could he recollect what it was to have trust reposed in him. He knew — he could not help knowing — how superior he was in ability and common-sense to any in that household; he knew

that his father at least was perfectly aware of this; and yet that Lord Beauport could not disconnect the idea of bodily decrepitude and mental weakness; and therefore looked upon his eldest son as little more than a child in mind. As for Caterham's mother, the want of any feeling in common between them, the utter absence of any maternal tenderness, the manifest distaste with which she regarded him, and the half-wearied, half-contemptuous manner in which she put aside the attempts he made towards a better understanding between them, had long since begun to tell upon him. There was a time when, smarting under her lifelong neglect, and overcome by the utter sense of desolation weighing him down, he had regarded his mother with a feeling bordering on aversion; then her presence, occasionally bestowed upon him — always for her own purposes — awakened in him something very like disgust. But he had long since conquered that: he had long since argued himself out of that frame of mind. Self-commune had done its work; the long, long days and nights of patient reflection and self-examination, aided by an inexplicable sense of an overhanging great change had softened and subdued all that had been temporarily hard and harsh in Lord Caterham's nature; and there was no child, kneeling at its little bedside, whose "God bless dear papa and mamma!" was more tenderly earnest than the blessing which the crippled man constantly invoked on his parents.

He loved them in a grave, steady, reverential, dutiful way — loved them even with greater

warmth, with more complete fondness than he had done for years; but his love never touched his instinct of justice — never warped his sense of what was right. He remembered how, years before, he had been present, a mere boy, sitting perched up in his wheelchair, apparently forgotten in an obscure corner of his father's study at Homershams, while Lord Beauport administered a terrific "wigging," ending in threats of gaols and magistrates, to an unlucky wretch accused of poaching by the head-keeper; and he recollected how, when the man had been dismissed with a severe warning, he had talked to and argued with his father, first on the offence, and then on Lord Beauport's administration of justice, with an air of grave and earnest wisdom which had amused his father exceedingly. He had held the same sentiments throughout his dreary life — he held them now. He knew that a plot was formed by his mother to bring his brother Lionel back to England, with a view to his marriage with Annie Maurice, and he was determined that that plot should not succeed. Why? He had his reasons, as they had theirs. To his own heart he confessed that he loved Annie with all the depth of his soul; but that was not what prompted him in this matter. He should be far removed from the troubling before that; but he had his reason and he should keep it to himself. They had not trusted in him, though they had been compelled to take allies from the outside — dear old Algy Barford, for instance — but they had not trusted him, and he would not reveal his secret. Was Lionel to

marry Annie Maurice, eh? No; that should never be. He might not be there himself to prevent it; but he would leave behind him instructions with some one, which would — Ah! he had hit upon the some one at once, — Geoffrey Ludlow, Annie's oldest and dearest friend, honest as the day, brave and disinterested; not a clever business man perhaps, but one who, armed with what he could arm him with, must, with his sheer singleness of purpose, carry all before him. So far, so good; but there would be a first step which they would take perhaps before he could bring that weapon into play. His mother would contrive to get Lionel into the house, on his return, to live with them, so that he might have constant opportunities of access to Annie. That was a point in which, as he gleaned, she placed the greatest confidence. If her Lionel had not lost all the fascinating qualities which had previously so distinguished him; if he preserved his looks and his address, this young girl — so inexperienced in the world's ways, so warm-hearted and impressible — would have no choice but to succumb.

Caterham would see about that at once. Lionel should never remain *en permanence* in that house again. Lady Beauport would object of course. She had, when she had set her mind upon an object, a steady perseverance in its accomplishment; but neither her patience nor her diplomacy were comparable to his, when he was equally resolved, as she should find. No; on that point at least he was determined. His darling, his treasure, should not

even be compelled to run the gauntlet of such a sin-stained courtship as his brother Lionel's must necessarily be. What might be awaiting her in the future, God alone knew: temptations innumerable; pursuit by fortune-hunters; all those trials which beset a girl who, besides being pretty and rich, has no blood-relative on whom to reckon for counsel and aid. He would do his best to remedy this deficiency; he would leave the fullest instructions, the warmest adjurations to good Geoffrey Ludlow — ah! what a pity it was that Ludlow's wife was not more heartful and reliable! — and he would certainly place a veto upon the notion that Lionel, on his return, should become an inmate of the house. He knew that this must be done quickly, and he determined to take the first opportunity that presented itself. That opportunity was not long in coming; within ten days after Margaret's fainting-fit, Lady Beauport paid one of her rare maternal visits, and Lord Caterham saw that his chance had arrived.

There was an extra glow of geniality in Lady Beauport's manner that morning, and the frosty peck that she had made at her son's cheek had perhaps a trifle more warmth in it than usual. She seated herself, instead of standing, as was her wont, and chatted pleasantly.

"What is this I hear about your having a lady fainting in your room, Arthur?" said she, with one of her shiniest smiles. (What calumny they spread about enamel! Lady Beauport smiled perpetually, and her complexion never cracked in the

slightest degree.) "You must not bring down scandal on our extremely proper house. She did faint, didn't she?"

"O, yes, mother, she did faint undoubtedly — went what you call regularly 'off,' I believe."

"Ah! so Stephens told Timpson. Well, sir, don't you think that is reprehensible enough? A lady comes to call on a bachelor, and is discovered fainting! Why? Heaven only knows —" and her ladyship gave an unpleasantly knowing chuckle.

"Well, I must admit that no one knows, or ever will know why, save that the lady was probably over-fatigued, having only just recovered from a serious illness. But then, you know, the lady's husband was with her, so that —"

"O, yes, I heard all about that. You are a most prudent swain, Caterham! The lady's husband with her, indeed! Most prudent! You always remind me of the play — I don't know what it's called — something about a French milliner and a screen —"

"'The School for Scandal,' you mean?"

"Very likely. I've forgotten the name, but I know I recollect seeing Farren and Miss Foote and all of them in it. And I so often think of the two brothers: you so quiet and reserved, like one; and the other so rackety and buoyant, so full of high spirits and gaiety, like our Lionel. Ah me!" and Lady Beauport heaved a deep sigh and clasped her hands sadly in front of her.

Caterham smiled — rather a sad dreary smile — as he said, "Let us trust that quiet and reserve don't always have the effect which they produced on the

gentleman to whom you are alluding, mother. But I may as well let you know the real story of Mrs. Ludlow's fainting-fit, which seems to have become rather warped in its journey. I had asked her husband to call upon me on a matter of business; and he foolishly brought her — only just out of her confinement — with him. The consequence was, that, as we were talking, and she was looking through a book of photographs, she fainted away."

"Ay! I heard something of that sort. She must be a curious person to be so easily affected, or it was thoughtless of her husband to bring her out too soon. He is an odd kind of man though, is he not? Absent, and that kind of thing?"

"Ye-es; his heart is in his work, and he is generally thinking about it."

"So I had imagined. What odd people you know, Arthur! Your acquaintances all seem such strange people — so different from your father's and mine!"

"Yes, mother," said Caterham, with a repetition of the sad smile; "perhaps you're right generally. Your friends would scarcely care for me, and I am sure I do not care for them. But Geoffrey Ludlow became known to me through his old intimacy with Annie — our Annie."

"Ye-es. I scarcely know why 'our Annie,' though. You see, both your father and I have many blood-relations, more or less distant, on either side; and it would not be particularly convenient if the mere fact of their being blood-relations compelled us

to acknowledge them as 'ours.' Not that I've any thing to say against Miss Maurice, though; on the contrary, she's a very charming girl. At one time I thought that — However, let that pass. She holds quite a different position now; and I think every one will allow that my treatment of her is what it should be."

"Of course, mother. No one would dream of doubting it."

"Well, perhaps not, Arthur; but you're such a recluse, you know, that you're scarcely a judge of these things — one does not know what people won't say. The world is so full of envy and jealousy, and all that, I'm sure my position in regard to the matter is any thing but an agreeable one. Here I am, having to act *chaperon* to this girl, who is known now as an heiress; and all kinds of men paying her attention, simply on account of her wealth. What I suffer when we're out together, you can't conceive. Every night, wherever we may be, there is a certain set of men always hanging about her, waiting for an introduction — persons whose acquaintance cannot do her the slightest good, and with whom she is yet quite as willing to talk or to dance as she is with the most available *parti* in London."

Caterham smiled again. "You forget, mother, that she's not accustomed to the kind of life —"

"No; I don't forget any thing of the kind, Arthur. It is her not being accustomed to it that is my greatest trouble. She is as raw as a child of seventeen after her first drawing-room. If she had any *savoir faire*, any knowledge of society, I should

be perfectly at ease. A girl of any appreciation would know how to treat these people in an instant. Why, I know myself, that when I was far younger than Miss Maurice, I should have felt a kind of instinctive warning against twothirds of the men with whom Annie Maurice is as talkative and as pleasant as though they were really persons whose acquaintance it was most desirable that she should make."

"And yet Annie is decidedly a clever girl."

"So much the worse, Arthur, — so much the worse. The more reason that she is utterly unlikely to possess or to be able readily to acquire the peculiar knowledge which would fit her to act under the circumstances of which I am speaking. Your clever people — such at least as are called clever by you and those whom you cultivate — are precisely the people who act idiotically in worldly affairs, who either know nothing or who set at defiance the *convenances* of society, and of whom nothing can be made. That man — no, let me give you an example — that man who dined here last Thursday on your invitation — Professor Somebody, wasn't he? — I've heard of him at that place where they give the scientific lectures in Albemarle Street — was any thing ever seen like his cravat, or his shoes, or the way in which he ate his soup? — he trod on my dress twice in going down to dinner, and I heard perfectly plainly what Lady Clanronald said to that odious Mr. Beauchamp Hogg about him."

"My father spoke to me in the highest terms about —"

"Of course he did; that's just it. Your father knows nothing about this sort of thing. It all falls upon me. If Annie Maurice were to make a *mésalliance*, or, without going so far as that, were to permit herself to be engaged to some penniless fortune-hunter, and were to refuse — as she very likely would, for she has an amount of obstinacy in her composition, I am inclined to think, which one very seldom finds — to listen to the remonstrances of those whose opinion ought to have weight with her, it is I, not your father, who would be blamed by the world."

"Your troubles certainly seem greater, mother, than I, in my bachelor ignorance, could have imagined."

"They are not comprehensible even after my explanation, Arthur, by those who have not to undergo them. There is scarcely any thing in my married life which has given me such pleasure as the thought that, having no daughters, I should be relieved of all duties of chaperonage; that I should not be compelled to go to certain places unless I wished; and that I should be able to leave others at what hours I liked. And now I find this very duty incumbent upon me."

"Well, but, my dear mother, surely Annie is the very last girl in the world for whom it is necessary to make any such sacrifices. She does not care about going out; and when out, she seems from all she says to me, to have only one anxiety, and that is — to get home again as soon as possible."

"Ay, from all she says to you, Arthur; but then

you know, as I've said before, you are a regular old bachelor, without the power of comprehending these things, and to whom a girl certainly would not be likely to show her real feelings. No; there's only one way to relieve me from my responsibility."

"And that is —"

"And that is by getting her married."

"A-ah!" Caterham drew a long breath — it was coming now.

"Married," continued Lady Beauport, "to some one whom we know, and in whom we could trust; some one who would keep her near us, so that we could still keep up an interest in her; and you — for I know how very much attached you are to her, Arthur — could see her constantly, without trouble to yourself. That is the only manner in which I can see a conclusion to my anxiety on Annie's account."

Lady Beauport endeavoured to speak in the same tone in which she had commenced the conversation; but there was a quiver in her voice and a tremulous motion in her hands which showed Caterham plainly that she was ill at ease.

"And do you think that such a husband would be easily found for Annie, mother?" said he, looking up at her with one of his steady piercing glances from under his eyebrows.

"Not easily, of course; but still to be found, Arthur."

"From your manner, you seem to have already given the subject some attention. May I ask

if you have any one in prospect who would fulfil all the conditions you have laid down in the first place, and in the second would be likely to be acceptable to Annie?"

"How very singular you are, Arthur! You speak in a solemn tone, as if this were the most important matter in the world."

"It is sufficiently important to Annie at least. Would you mind answering me?"

Lady Beauport saw that it was useless fighting off the explanation any further. Her project must be disclosed now, however it might be received by her eldest son; and she determined to bring her stateliest and most dignified manner to its disclosure: so she composed her face to its usual cold statuesque calmness, folded her wandering hands before her, and in a voice in which there was neither break nor tremor, said:

"No: I will answer you quite straightforwardly. I think that it would be an admirable thing for all parties if a marriage could be arranged between Annie Maurice and your brother Lionel. Lionel has position, and is a distinguished-looking man, of whom any woman might be proud; and the fortune which Mr. Ampthill so oddly left to Miss Maurice will enable him to hold his own before the world, and — how strangely you look, Caterham! — what is the matter? — what were you about to say?"

"Only one thing, mother — that marriage must never be."

"Must never be!"

"Never. Hear me out. I have kept accurate account of all you have said, and will judge you in the first place simply out of your own mouth. Your first point was that Miss Maurice should be married to some one whom we knew, and whom we could trust. Could we trust Lionel? Could we trust the man whose father's head was bowed to the dust, whose mother's eyes were filled with tears at the mere recital of his deeds of sin and shame? Could we trust the man who was false to his friend, and who dragged down into the dirt not merely himself, but all who bore his name? You spoke of his position — what is that, may I ask? Are we to plume ourselves on our relationship with an outcast? or are we to hold out as an inducement to the heiress the fact that her intended husband's liberty is at the mercy of those whom he has swindled and defrauded?"

"Caterham! Arthur! you are mad — you —"

"No, mother, I am simply speaking the truth. I should not even have insisted on that in all its bitterness, had I not been goaded to it by your words. You talk of devoting the fortune which Annie Maurice has inherited to setting Lionel right before the world, and you expect me to sit quietly by! Why, the merest instincts of justice would have made me cry out against such a monstrous proposition, even if Lionel had not long since forfeited, as Annie has long since won, all my love."

"A-h!" said Lady Beauport, suddenly pausing in her tears, and looking up at him, — "long since won all your love, eh? I have often suspected that,

Caterham; and now you have betrayed yourself. It is jealousy then, — mere personal jealousy, — by which all your hatred of your younger brother is actuated!"

Once more the dreary smile came over Lord Caterham's face. "No, mother," said he, "it is not that. I love Annie Maurice as I love the sun, as I love health, as I love rest from pain and weariness; and with about as much hope of winning either. You could confer on me no greater happiness than by showing me the man deserving of her love; and the thought that her future would have a chance of being a happy one would relieve my life of its heaviest anxiety. But marry Lionel she shall not; nay, more, she shall not be exposed to the chance of communication with him, so long as I can prevent it."

"You forget yourself, Lord Caterham! You forget not merely whose house you are in, but to whom you are speaking."

"I trust not, mother. I trust I shall never — certainly not now, at this time — forget my duty to you and to my father; but I know more than I can ever divulge even to you. Take for granted what I tell you; let what you know of Lionel's ways and conduct suffice to prove that a marriage between him and Annie is impossible, — that you would be culpable in lending yourselves to such a scheme."

"I have not the least idea of what you are talking about, Arthur," said Lady Beauport after a minute's pause. "You appear to have conceived some ridiculous idea about your brother Lionel, into the discussion of which you must really excuse my fol-

lowing you. Besides, even if you had good grounds for all you say, you are too late in making the remonstrance. Lionel arrived in England the day before yesterday."

Lord Caterham started, and by the help of his stick raised himself for a moment.

"Lionel returned! Lionel in England, mother! After all his promises, after the strict conditions on which my father purchased for him immunity from the penalties of his crime! How is this? Does Lord Beauport know it?"

Lady Beauport hesitated. She had been betrayed by her vexation into saying more than she had intended, and had placed Lionel in his brother's power. Lord Caterham, she had hoped, would have received her confidence in a different spirit, — perhaps she had calculated on his being flattered by its novelty, — and would assist her in breaking the fact of the prodigal's return to his father, and winning him over to her way of thinking. She had by no means forgotten the painful solemnity with which the Earl had renounced Lionel, and the formal sentence of exclusion which had been passed against him; but Lady Beauport understood her husband well, and had managed him with tolerable success for many years. He had forbidden all mention of their son to her, as to every other member of the family; but Lady Beauport had been in the habit of insinuating an occasional mention of him for some time past; and it had not been badly received. Perhaps neither the father nor the mother would have acknowledged to themselves or to each other the share in this change of

feeling which belonged to the unmistakable daily decline of Lord Caterham's health. They never alluded to the future, but they saw it, and it influenced them both. Lady Beauport had not looked for Lionel's return so soon; she had expected more patience — it might have been appropriately called more decency — from him; she had thought her difficulties would be much lessened before his return; but he had neglected her injunctions, and forestalled her instructions: he had arrived, — there was no help for it; she must meet the difficulty now. She had been meeting difficulties, originating from the same source, for many years; and though Caterham's manner annoyed her deeply, she kept her courage up. Her first instinct was to evade her son's last question, by assuming an injured tone in reference to his first. So she said,

"O, it's all very well to talk about his promises, Arthur; but, really, how you could expect Lionel to remain in Australia I cannot understand."

"I did not, and I do not, form any expectations whatever concerning Lionel, mother," her son replied, in a steady voice, and without releasing her from his gaze; "that is beside the question. Lionel has broken his pledged word to my father by returning here, — you know he has, — and he has not given any career a fair trial. I can guess the expectations with which he has returned," he continued in a bitter tone; "and God knows I trust they are not unfounded. But my place is not vacant *yet;* and he has forfeited his own. You cannot restore it to him. Why has he returned?"

Lady Beauport did not dare to say, "Because I wrote to him, and told him to come home, and marry Annie Maurice, and buy the world's fickle favour over again with her money, while waiting for yours;" but her silence said it for her; and Caterham let his eyes drop from her face in disgust, as he coldly said,

"Once more, madam, I ask you, is my father aware that Lionel is in London?"

"No," she replied boldly, seeing things were at the worst; "he is not. I tell you, Caterham, if you tell him, before I have time and opportunity to break it to him, and set your father against him, and on keeping his word just as a point of pride, I will never forgive you. What good could it do you? What harm has Lionel done you? How could he stay in that horrid place? He's not a tradesman, I should think; and what could he *do* there? nor an Irishman, I hope; so what could he *be* there? The poor boy was perfectly miserable; and when I told him to come home, I thought you'd help me, Arthur, — I did indeed."

A grave sad smile passed over Lord Caterham's worn face. Here was his proud mother trying to cajole him for the sake of the profligate son who had never felt either affection or respect for her. Had a less object been at stake he might have yielded to the weakness which he rather pitied than despised; yielded all the more readily that it would not be for long. But Annie's peace, Annie's welfare was in danger, and his mother's weakness could meet with no toleration at his hands.

"Listen to me, mother," he said; "and let this be no more mentioned between us. I am much exhausted to-day, and have little strength at any time; but my resolve is unshaken. I will not inform my father of Lionel's return, if you think you can manage to tell him, and to induce him to take it without anger more successfully than I can. But while I live Lionel Brakespere shall never live in the same house with Annie Maurice; and whether I am living or dead, I will prevent his ever making her his wife. This is her proper home; and I will do my best to secure her remaining in it; but how long do you suppose she would stay, if she heard the plans you have formed?" Lady Beauport attempted to speak, but he stopped her. "One moment more, mother," he said, "and I have done. Let me advise you to deceive my father no more for Lionel. He is easily managed, I have no doubt, by those whom he loves and admires; but he is impatient of deceit, being very loyal himself. Tell him without delay what you have done; but do not, if even he takes it better than you hope, and that you think such a suggestion would be safe, — do not suggest that Lionel should come here. Let me, for my little time, be kept from any collision with my father. I ask this of you, mother." O, how the feeble voice softened, and the light in the eyes deepened! "And my requests are neither frequent nor hard to fulfil, I think."

He had completely fathomed her purpose; he had seen the projects she had formed, even while he was speaking the first sentences; and had defeated them. By a violent effort she controlled her temper, — per-

haps she had never made so violent an effort, even for Lionel, before, — and answered,

"I hardly understand you, Arthur; but perhaps you are right. At all events, you agree to say nothing to your father, — to leave it to me?"

"Certainly," said Caterham. He had won the day; but his mother's manner had no sign of defeat about it, no more than it had sign of softening. She rose, and bade him good-morning. He held her hand for a moment, and his eyes followed her wistfully, as she went out of his room.

As she passed through the passage, just outside her son's door she saw a stout keen-looking man sitting on the bench, who rose and bowed as she passed.

When Stephens answered the bell, he found his master lying back, bloodless and almost fainting. After he had administered the usual restoratives, and when life seemed flowing back again, the valet said,

"Inspector Blackett, my lord, outside."

Lord Caterham made a sign with his hand, and the stout man entered.

"The usual story, Blackett, I suppose?"

"Sorry to say so, my lord. No news. Two of my men tried Maidstone again yesterday, and Canterbury, thinking they were on the scent there; but no signs of her."

"Very good, Blackett," said Caterham faintly; "don't give in yet."

Then, as the door closed behind the inspector, the poor sufferer looked up heavenward and muttered, "O Lord, how long — how long?"

END OF BOOK THE SECOND.

BOOK THE THIRD.

LAND AT LAST.

CHAPTER I.

The Whole Truth.

No one who knew Geoffrey Ludlow would have recognised him in the round-shouldered man with the prone head, the earth-seeking eyes, the hands plunged deeply in his pockets, plodding home on that day on which he had determined that Margaret should give him an explanation of her conduct towards him. Although Geoff had never been a roisterer, had never enlisted in that army of artists whose members hear "the chimes o' midnight," had always been considered more or less slow and steady, and was looked upon as one of the most respectable representatives of the community, yet his happy disposition had rendered him a general favourite even amongst those ribalds, and his equable temper and kindly geniality were proverbial among all the brethren of the brush. Ah, that equable temper, that kindly geniality, — where were they now? Those expanded nostrils, those closed lips spoke of very different feelings; that long steady stride was very different from the joyous step which had provoked the cynicism of the City-bound clerks; that

puckered brow, those haggard cheeks, could not be recognised as the facial presentments of the Geoffrey Ludlow of a few short months since.

In good sooth he was very much altered. The mental worrying so long striven against in silence had begun to tell upon his appearance; the big broad shoulders had become rounded; the gait had lost its springy elasticity, the face was lined, and the dark-brown hair round the temples and the long full beard were dashed with streaks of silver. These changes troubled him but little. Never, save perhaps during the brief period of his courtship of Margaret, had he given the smallest thought to his personal appearance; yellow soap and cold water had been his cosmetics, and his greatest sacrifice to vanity had been to place himself at rare intervals under the hairdresser's scissors. But there were other changes to which, try as he might, he could not blind himself. He knew that the very source and fount of his delight was troubled, if not sullied; he knew that all his happiness, so long wished for, so lately attained, was trembling in the balance; he felt that indefinable, indescribable sensation of something impending, something which would shatter his roof-tree and break up that home so recently established. As he plunged onward through the seething streets, looking neither to the right nor to the left, he thought vaguely of the events of the last few months of his life — thought of them, regarding them as a dream. How long was it since he was so happy at home with his old mother and with Til? when the monthly meeting of the Titians caused his greatest excite-

ment, and when his hopes of fame were yet visionary and indistinct? How long was it since he had met *her* that fearful night, and had drunk of the beauty and the witchery which had had such results? He was a man now before the world with a name which people knew and respected, with a wife whose beauty people admired; but, ah! where was the quietude, the calm unpretending happiness of those old days?

What could it mean? Had she a wish ungratified? He taxed his mind to run through all the expressions of her idle fancy, but could think of none with which he had not complied. Was she ill? He had made that excuse for her before her baby was born; but now, not merely the medical testimony, but his own anxious scrutiny told him that she was in the finest possible health. There was an odd something about her sometimes which he could not make out — an odd way of listening vacantly, and not replying to direct questions, which he had noticed lately, and only lately; but that might be a part of her idiosyncrasy. Her appetite too was scarcely as good as it used to be; but in all other respects she seemed perfectly well. There might have been some difficulty with his mother and sister, he had at first imagined; but the old lady had been wonderfully complaisant; and Til and Margaret, when they met, seemed to get on excellently together. To be sure his mother had assumed the reins of government during Margaret's confinement, and held them until the last moment compatible with decency; but her *régime* had been over long since; and Margaret was the last person to struggle

for power so long as all trouble was taken off her hands. Had the neighbours slighted her, she might have had some cause for complaint; but the neighbours were every thing that was polite, and indeed at the time of her illness had shown her attention meriting a warmer term. What could it mean? Was there — No; he crushed out the idea as soon as it arose in his mind. There could not be any question about — any one else — preying on her spirits? The man, her destroyer — who had abandoned and deserted her — was far away; and she was much too practical a woman not to estimate all his conduct at its proper worth. No amount of girlish romance could survive the cruel schooling which his villany had subjected her to; and there was no one else whom she had seen who could have had any influence over her. Besides, at the first, when he had made his humble proffer of love, she had only to have told him that it could not be, and he would have taken care that her future was provided for — if not as it had been, at all events far beyond the reach of want. O, no, that could not be.

So argued Geoff with himself — brave, honest, simple old Geoff, with the heart of a man and the guilelessness of a child. So he argued, determining at the same time that he would pluck out the heart of the mystery at once, whatever might be at its root; any thing would be better than this suspense preying on him daily, preventing him from doing his work, and rendering him moody and miserable.

But before he reached his home his resolution failed, and his heart sunk within him. What if Mar-

garet were silent and preoccupied? what if the occasional gloom upon her face became more and more permanent? Had not her life been full of sorrow? and was it wonderful that the remembrance of it from time to time came over her? She had fearlessly confided her whole story to him; she had given him time to reflect on it before committing himself to her; and would it be generous, would it be even just, to call her to account now for freaks of behaviour engendered doubtless in the memory of that bygone time? After all, what was the accusation against her? None. Had there been the smallest trace of levity in her conduct, how many eyebrows were there ready to be lifted — how many shoulders waiting to be shrugged! But there was nothing of the kind; all that could be said about her was that, — all that could be said about her — now he thought it over, nothing was said about her; all that was hinted was that her manner was cold and impassable; that she took no interest in what was going on around her, and that therefore there must be something wrong. There is always something to be complained of. If her manner had been light and easy, they would have called her a flirt, and pitied him for having married a woman so utterly ill-suited to his staid habits. He knew so little of her when he married her, that he ran every kind of risk as to what she might really prove to be; and on reflection he thought he had been exceedingly lucky. She might have been giddy, vulgar, loud, presuming, extravagant; whereas she was simply reserved and undemonstrative, — nothing more. He had been a

fool in thinking of her as he had done during the last few weeks; he had, — without her intending it doubtless, for she was an excellent woman, — he had taken his tone in this matter from his mother, with whom Margaret was evidently no favourite, and — there, never mind — it was at an end now. She was his own darling wife, his lovely companion, merely to sit and look at whom was rapturous delight to a man of his keen appreciation of the beauty of form and colour; and as to her coldness and reserve, it was but a temporary mannerism, which would soon pass away.

So argued Geoffrey Ludlow with himself, — brave, honest, simple old Geoff, with the heart of a man and the guilelessness of a child.

So happy was he under the influence of his last thought, that he longed to take Margaret to his heart at once, and without delay to make trial of his scheme for dissipating her gloom; but when he reached home, the servant told him that her mistress had gone out very soon after he himself had left that morning, and had not yet returned. So he went through into the studio, intending to work at his picture; but when he got there he sunk down into a chair, staring vacantly at the lay-figure, arranged as usual in a preposterous attitude, and thinking about Margaret. Rousing himself, he found his palette, and commenced to set it; but while in the midst of this task, he suddenly fell a-thinking again, and stood there mooning, until the hope of doing any work was past, and the evening shadows were falling on the landscape. Then he put up his

palette and his brushes, and went into the dining-room. He walked to the window, but had scarcely reached it, when he saw a cab drive up. The man opened the door, and Margaret descended, said a few hasty words to the driver, who touched his hat and fastened on his horse's nosebag, and approached the house with rapid steps.

From his position in the window, he had noticed a strange light in her eyes which he had never before seen there, a bright hectic flush on her cheek, a tight compression of her lips. When she entered the room he saw that in his first hasty glance he had not been deceived; that the whole expression of her face had changed from its usual state of statuesque repose, and was now stern, hard, and defiant.

He was standing in the shadow of the window-curtain, and she did not see him at first; but throwing her parasol on the table, commenced pacing the room. The lamp was as yet unlit, and the flickering firelight — now glowing a deep dull red, now leaping into yellow flame — gave an additional weirdness to the set intensity of her beautiful face. Gazing at her mechanically walking to and fro, her head supported by one hand, her eyes gleaming, her hair pushed back off her face, Geoffrey again felt that indescribable sinking at his heart; and there was something of terror in the tone in which, stepping forward, he uttered her name — "Margaret!"

In an instant she stopped in her walk, and turning towards the place whence the voice came, said, "You there, Geoffrey?"

"Yes, darling, — who else? I was standing at

the window when the cab drove up, and saw you get out. By the way, you've not sent away the cab, love; is he paid?"

"No, not yet, — he will — let him stay a little."

"Well, but why keep him up here, my child, where there is no chance of his getting a return-fare? Better pay him and let him go. I'll go and pay him!" and he was leaving the room.

"Let him stay, please," said Margaret in her coldest tones; and Geoffrey turned back at once. But as he turned he saw a thrill run through her, and marked the manner in which she steadied her hand on the mantelpiece on which she was leaning. In an instant he was by her side.

"You are ill, my darling?" he exclaimed. "You have done too much again, and are over-fatigued —"

"I am perfectly well," she said; "it was nothing — or whatever it was, it has passed. I did not know you had returned. I was going to write to you."

"To write to me!" said Geoff in a hollow voice, — "to write to me!"

"To write to you. I had something to tell you — and — and I did not know whether I should ever see you again!"

For an instant the table against which Geoffrey Ludlow stood seemed to spin away under his touch, and the whole room reeled. A deadly faintness crept over him, but he shook it off with one great

effort, and said in a very low tone, "I scarcely understand you — please explain."

She must have had the nature of a fiend to look upon that large-souled loving fellow, stricken down by her words as by a sudden blow, and with his heart all bleeding, waiting to hear the rest of her sentence. She had the nature of a fiend, for through her set teeth she said calmly and deliberately:

"I say I did not know whether I should ever see you again. That cab is detained by me to take me away from this house, to which I ought never to have come — which I shall never enter again."

Geoff had sunk into a chair, and clutching the corner of the table with both hands, was looking up at her with a helpless gaze.

"You don't speak!" she continued; "and I can understand why you are silent. This decision has come upon you unexpectedly, and you can scarcely realise its meaning or its origin. I am prepared to explain both to you. I had intended doing so in a letter, which I should have left behind me; but since you are here, it is better that I should speak."

The table was laid for dinner, and there was a small decanter of sherry close by Geoff's hand. He filled a glass from it and drank it eagerly. Apparently involuntarily, Margaret extended her hand towards the decanter; but she instantly withdrew it, and resumed:

"You know well, Geoffrey Ludlow, that when you asked me to become your wife, I declined to give you any answer until you had heard the story of my former life. When I noticed your growing

interest in me — and I noticed it from its very first germ — I determined that before you pledged yourself to me — for my wits had been sharpened in the school of adversity, and I read plainly enough that love from such a man as you had but one meaning and one result, — I determined that before you pledged yourself to me you should learn as much as it was necessary for you to know of my previous history. Although my early life had been spent in places far away from London, and among persons whom it was almost certain I should never see again, it was, I thought, due to you to explain all to you, lest the gossiping fools of the world might some day vex your generous heart with stories of your wife's previous career, which she had kept from you. Do you follow me?"

Geoffrey bowed his head, but did not speak.

"In that story I told you plainly that I had been deceived by a man under promise of marriage; that I had lived with him as his wife for many months; that he had basely deserted me and left me to starve, — left me to die, — as I should have died had you not rescued me. You follow me still?"

She could not see his face now, — it was buried in his hands; but there was a motion of his head, and she proceeded:

"That man betrayed me when I trusted him, used me while I amused him, deserted me when I palled upon him. He ruined, you restored me; he left me to die, you brought me back to life; he strove to drag me to perdition, you to raise me to

repute. I respected, I honoured you; but I loved him! yes, from first to last I loved him; infatuated, mad as I knew it to be, I loved him throughout! Had I died in those streets from which you rescued me, I should have found strength to bless him with my last breath. When I recovered consciousness, my first unspoken thought was of him. It was that I would live, that I would make every exertion to hold on to life, that I might have the chance of seeing him again. Then dimly, and as in a dream, I saw you and heard your voice, and knew that you were to be a portion of my fate. Ever since, the image of that man has been always present before me; his soft words of love have been always ringing in my ears; his gracious presence has been always at my side. I have striven and striven against the infatuation. Before Heaven I swear to you that I have prayed night after night that I might not be led into that awful temptation of retrospect which beset me; that I might be strengthened to love you as you should be loved, to do my duty towards you as it should be done. All in vain, all in vain! That one fatal passion has sapped my being, and rendered me utterly incapable of any other love in any other shape. I know what you have done for me — more than that, I know what you have suffered for me. You have said nothing; but do you think I have not seen how my weariness, my coldness, the impossibility of my taking interest in all the little schemes you have laid for my diversion, have irked and pained you? Do you think I do not know what it is for a full heart to beat itself into quiet

against a stone? I know it all; and if I could have spared you one pang, I swear I would have done so. But I loved this man; ah, how I loved him! He was but a memory to me then; but that memory was far, far dearer than all reality! He is more than a memory to me now; for he lives, and he is in London, and I have seen him!"

Out of Geoffrey Ludlow's hands came, raised up suddenly, a dead white face, with puckered lips, knit brows, and odd red streaks and indentations round the eyes.

"Yes, Geoffrey Ludlow," she continued, not heeding the apparition, "I have seen him, — now, within this hour, — seen him, bright, well, and handsome — O, so handsome! — as when I saw him first; and that has determined me. While I thought of him as perhaps dead; while I knew him to be thousands of miles away, I could bear to sit here, to drone out the dull monotonous life, striving to condone the vagrancy of my thoughts by the propriety of my conduct, — heart-sick, weary, and remorseful. Yes, remorseful, so far as you are concerned; for you are a true and noble man, Geoffrey. But now that he is here, close to me, I could not rest another hour, — I must go to him at once. Do you hear, Geoffrey, — at once."

He tried to speak, but his lips were parched and dry, and he only made an inarticulate sound. There was no mistaking the flash of his eyes, however. In them Margaret had never seen such baleful light; so that she was scarcely astonished when, his voice returning, he hissed out, "I know him!"

"You know him?"

"Yes; just come back from Australia — Lord Caterham's brother! I had a letter from Lord Caterham to-day,—his brother—Lionel Brakespere!"

"Well," she exclaimed, "what then? Suppose it be Lionel Brakespere, what then, I ask — what then?"

"Then!" said Geoffrey, poising his big sinewy arm — "then, let him look to himself; for, by the Lord, I'll kill him!"

"What!" and in an instant she had left her position against the mantelpiece, and was leaning over the table at the corner where he sat, her face close to his, her eyes on his eyes, her hot breath on his cheeks — "You dare to talk of killing him, of doing him the slightest injury! You dare to lift your hand against my Lionel! Look here, Geoffrey Ludlow: you have been good and kind and generous to me, — have loved me, in your fashion — deeply, I know; and I would let us part friends; but I swear that if you attempt to wreak your vengeance on Lionel Brakespere, who has done you no harm — how has he injured you? — I will be revenged on you in a manner of which you little dream, but which shall break your heart and spirit, and humble your pride to the dust. Think of all this, Geoffrey Ludlow — think of it. Do nothing rashly, take no step that will madden me, and drive me to do something that will prevent your ever thinking of me with regret, when I am far away."

There was a softness in her voice which touched a chord in Geoffrey Ludlow's breast. The fire faded

out of his eyes; his hands, which had been tight-clenched, relaxed, and spread out before him in entreaty; he looked up at Margaret through blinding tears, and in a broken voice said,

"When you are far away! O, my darling, my darling, you are not going to leave me? It cannot be, — it is some horrible dream. To leave me, who live but for you, whose existence is bound up in yours! It cannot be. What have I done? — what can you charge me with? Want of affection, of devotion to you? O God, it is hard that I should have to suffer in this way! But you won't go, Margaret darling? Tell me that — only tell me that."

She shrank farther away from him, and seemed for a moment to cower before the vehemence and anguish of his appeal; but the next her face darkened and hardened, and as she answered him, the passion in her voice was dashed with a tone of contempt.

"Yes, I will leave you," she said, — "of course I will leave you. Do you not hear me? Do you not understand me? I have seen him, I tell you, and every thing which is not him has faded out of my life. What should I do here, or any where, where he is not? The mere idea is absurd. I have only half lived since I lost him, and I could not live at all now that I have seen him again. Stay here! not leave *you!* stay *here!*" She looked round the room with a glance of aversion and avoidance, and went on with increasing rapidity: "You have never understood me. How should you? But the time has come now when you must try to under-

stand me, for your own sake; for mine it does not matter — nothing matters now."

She was standing within arm's-length of him, and her face was turned full upon him: but she did not seem to see him. She went on, as though reckoning with herself, and Geoffrey gazed upon her in stupefied amazement; his momentary rage quenched in the bewilderment of his anguish.

"I don't deny your goodness — I don't dispute it — I don't think about it at all; it is all done with, all past and gone; and I have no thought for it or you, beyond these moments in which I am speaking to you for the last time. I have suffered in this house torments which your slow nature could neither suffer nor comprehend — torments wholly impossible to endure longer. I have raged and rebelled against the dainty life of dulness and dawdling, the narrow hopes and the tame pleasures which have sufficed for you. I must have so raged and rebelled under any circumstances; but I might have gone on conquering the revolts, if I had not seen him. Now, I tell you, it is no longer possible, and I break with it at once and for ever. Let me go quietly, and in such peace as may be possible: for go I must and I will. You could as soon hold a hurricane by force or a wave of the sea by entreaty."

Geoffrey Ludlow covered his face with his hands, and groaned. Once again she looked at him — this time as if she saw him — and went on:

"Let me speak to you, while I can, of yourself — while I can, I say, for his face is rising between

me and all the world beside, and I can hardly force myself to remember any thing, to calculate any thing, to realise any thing which is not him. You ask me not to leave you; you would have me stay! Are you mad, Geoffrey Ludlow? Have you lived among your canvases and your colours until you have ceased to understand what men and women are, and to see facts? Do you know that I love him, though he left me to what you saved me from, so that all that you have done for me and given me has been burdensome and hateful to me, because these things had no connection with him, but marked the interval in which he was lost to me? Do you know that I love him so, that I have sickened and pined in this house, even as I sickened and pined for hunger in the streets you took me from, for the most careless word he ever spoke and the coldest look he ever gave me? Do you know the agonised longing which has been mine, the frantic weariness, the unspeakable loathing of every thing that set my life apart from the time when my life was his? No, you don't know these things! Again I say, how should you? Well, I tell them to you now, and I ask you, are you mad that you say, 'Don't leave me'? Would you have me stay with *you* to think of *him* all the weary hours of the day, all the wakeful hours of the night? Would you have me stay with you to feel, and make you know that I feel, the tie between us an intolerable and hideous bondage, and that with every pang of love for him came a throb of loathing for you? No, no! you are nothing to me now, — nothing, nothing! My thoughts hurry away

from you while I speak; but if any thing so preposterous as my staying with you could be possible, you would be the most hateful object on this earth to me."

"My God!" gasped Geoffrey. That was all. The utter, unspeakable horror with which her words, poured out in a hard ringing voice, which never faltered, filled him overpowered all remonstrance. A strange feeling, which was akin to fear of this beautiful unmasked demon, came over him. It was Margaret, his wife, who spoke thus! The knowledge and its fullest agony were in his heart; and yet a sense of utter strangeness and impossibility were there too. The whirl within him was not to be correctly termed thought; but there was in it something of the past, a puzzled remembrance of her strange quietude, her listlessness, her acquiescent, graceful, wearied, compliant ways; and this was she, — this woman whose eyes burned with flames of passion and desperate purpose, — on those ordinarily pale cheeks two spots of crimson glowed, — whose lithe frame trembled with the intense fervour of the love which she was declaring for another man! Yes, this was she! It seemed impossible; but it was true.

"I waste words," she said; "I am talking of things beside the question, and I don't want to lie to you. Why should I? There has been nothing in my life worth having but him, nothing bearable since I lost him, and there is nothing else since I have found him again. I say, I must leave you for your sake, and it is true; but I would leave you just

the same if it was not true. There is nothing henceforth in my life but him."

She moved towards the door as she spoke, and the action seemed to rouse Geoffrey from the stupefaction which had fallen upon him. She had her hand upon the door-handle though, before he spoke.

"You are surely mad!" he said; "I think so. — I hope so; but even mad women remember that they are mothers. Have you forgotten your child, that you rave thus of leaving your home?"

She took her hand from the door and leaned back against it — her head held up, and her eyes turned upon him, the dark eyebrows shadowing them with a stern frown.

"I am not mad," she said; "but I don't wonder you think me so. Continue to think so, if you needs must remember me at all. Love is madness to such as you; but it is life, and sense, and wisdom, and wealth to such as I and the man I love. At all events it is all the sanity I ask for or want. As for the child —" she paused for one moment, and waved her hand impatiently.

"Yes," repeated Geoffrey hoarsely, — "the child!"

"I will tell you then, Geoffrey Ludlow," she said, in a more deliberate tone than she had yet commanded, — "I care nothing for the child! Ay, look at me with abhorrence now; so much the better for *you*, and not a jot the worse for me. What is your abhorrence to me? — what was your love? There are women to whom their children are all in

all. I am not of their number; I never could have been. They are not women who love as I love. Where a child has power to sway and fill a woman's heart, to shake her resolution, and determine her life, love is not supreme. There is a proper and virtuous resemblance to it, no doubt, but not love — no, no, not love. I tell you I care nothing for the child. Geoffrey Ludlow, if I had loved you, I should have cared for him almost as little; if the man I love had been his father, I should have cared for him no more, if I know any thing of myself. The child does not need me. I suppose I am not without the brute instinct which would lead me to shelter and feed and clothe him, if he did; but what has he ever needed from me? If I could say without a lie that any thought of him weighs with me — but I cannot — I would say to you, for the child's sake, if for no other reason, I must go. The child is the last and feeblest argument you can use with me — with whom indeed there are none strong or availing."

She turned abruptly, and once more laid her hand upon the door-handle. Her last words had roused Geoffrey from the inaction caused by his amazement. As she coldly and deliberately avowed her indifference to the child, furious anger once more awoke within him. He strode hastily towards her and sternly grasped her by the left arm. She made a momentary effort to shake off his hold; but he held her firmly at arm's-length from him, and said through his closed teeth:

"You are a base and unnatural woman — more

base and unnatural than I believed any woman could be. As for me, I can keep silence on your conduct to myself; perhaps I deserved it, seeing where and how I found you." She started and winced. "As for the child, he is better motherless than with such a mother; but I took you from shame and sin, when I found you in the street, and married you; and you shall not return to them if any effort of mine can prevent it. You have no feeling, you have no conscience, you have no pride; you glory in a passion for a man who flung you away to starve! Woman, have you no sense of decency left, that you can talk of resuming your life of infamy and shame?"

The husband and wife formed a group which would have been awful to look upon, had there been any one to witness that terrible interview, as they stood confronting one another, while Geoffrey spoke. As his words came slowly forth, a storm of passion shook Margaret's frame. Every gleam of colour forsook her face; she was transformed into a fixed image of unspeakable wrath. A moment she stood silent, breathing quickly, her white lips dry and parted. Then, as a faint movement, something like a ghastly smile, crept over her face, she said:

"You are mistaken, Geoffrey Ludlow; I leave my life of infamy and shame in leaving *you!*"

"In leaving me! Again you are mad!"

"Again I speak the words of sanity and truth. If what I am going to tell you fills you with horror, I would have spared you; you have yourself to thank. I intended to have spared you this final

blow, — I intended to have left you in happy ignorance of the fact — which you blindly urge me to declare by your taunts. What did I say at the commencement of this interview? That I wanted us to part friends. But you will not have that. You reproach me with ingratitude; you taunt me with being an unnatural mother; finally, you fling at me my life of infamy and shame; I repeat that no infamy, no shame could attach to me until I became — your mistress!"

The bolt had shot home at last. Geoffrey leapt to his feet, and stood erect before her; but his strength must have failed him in that instant; for he could only gasp, "My mistress!"

"Your mistress. That is all I have been to you, so help me Heaven!"

"My wife! my own — married — lawful wife!"

"No, Geoffrey Ludlow, no! In that wretched lodging to which you had me conveyed, and where you pleaded your love, I told you — the truth indeed, but not the whole truth. Had you known me better then, — had you known me as you — as you know me now, you might have guessed that I was not one of those trusting creatures who are betrayed and ruined by fair words and beaming glances, come they from ever so handsome a man. One fact I concealed from you, thinking, as my Lionel had deserted me, and would probably never be seen again, that its revelation would prevent me from accepting the position which you were about to offer me; but the day that I fled from my home at Tenby I was married to Lionel Brakespere; and at

this moment I am his wife, not merely in the sight of God, but by the laws of man!"

For some instants he did not speak, he did not move from the chair into which he had again fallen heavily during her speech: he sat gazing at her, his breathing thickened, impeded, gasping. At length he said:

"You're — you're speaking truth?"

"I am speaking gospel-truth, Geoffrey Ludlow. You brought it upon yourself: I would have saved you from the knowledge of it if I could, but you brought it upon yourself."

"Yes — as you say — on myself;" still sitting gazing vacantly before him, muttering to himself rather than addressing her. Suddenly, with a wild shriek, "The child! O God, the child!"

"For the child's sake, no less than for your own, you will hold your tongue on this matter," said Margaret in her calm, cold, never-varying tone. "In this instance at least you will have sense enough to perceive the course you ought to take. What I have told you is known to none but you and me, and one other — who can be left to me to deal with. Let it be your care that the secret remains with us."

"But the child is a ——"

"Silence, man!" she exclaimed, seizing his arm, — "silence now, — for a few moments at all events. When I am gone, proclaim your child's illegitimacy and your own position if you will, but wait till then. Now I can remain here no longer. Such things as

I absolutely require I will send for. Good-bye, Geoffrey Ludlow."

She gathered her shawl around her, and moved towards the door. In an instant his lethargy left him; he sprang up, rushed before her, and stood erect and defiant.

"You don't leave me in this way, Margaret. You shall not leave me thus. I swear you shall not pass!"

She looked at him for a moment with a half-compassionate, half-interested face. This assumption of spirit and authority she had never seen in him before, and it pleased her momentarily. Then she said quietly:

"O yes, I shall. I am sure, Mr. Ludlow, you will not prevent my going to my husband!"

When the servant, after waiting more than an hour for dinner to be rung for, came into the room to see what was the cause of the protracted delay, she found her master prostrate on the hearth-rug, tossing and raving incoherently. The frightened girl summoned assistance; and when Dr. Brandram arrived, he announced Mr. Ludlow to be in the incipient stage of a very sharp attack of brain-fever.

CHAPTER II.

The Reverse of the Medal.

It was one of those cheerless days not unfrequent at the end of September, which first tell us that such fine weather as we have had has taken its departure, and that the long dreary winter is close at hand. The air was moist and "muggy;" there was no freshening wind to blow away the heavy dun clouds which lay banked up thick, and had seemed almost motionless for days; there was a dead faint depression over all things, which weighed heavily on the spirits, impeded the respiration, and relaxed the muscles. It was weather which dashed and cowed even the lightest-hearted, and caused the careworn and the broken to think self-destruction less extraordinary than they had hitherto considered it.

About noon a man was looking out of one of the upper-windows of Long's Hotel on the dreary desert of Bond Street. He was a tall man; who, with straight-cut features, shapely beard, curling light hair, and clear complexion, would have been generally considered more than good-looking, notwithstanding that his eyes were comparatively small and his mouth was decidedly sensual. That he was a man of breeding and society one could have told in an instant — could have told it by the colour and shape of his hands, by his bearing, by the very

manner in which he, leaving the window from time to time, lounged round the room, his hands plunged in his pockets or pulling at his tawny beard. You could have told it despite of his dress, the like of which had surely never been seen before on any visitor to that select hostelry; for he wore a thick jacket and trousers of blue pilot-cloth, a blue flannel-shirt, with a red-silk handkerchief knotted round the collar, and ankle jack-boots. When he jumped out of the cab at the door on the previous day, he had on a round tarpaulin-hat, and carried over his arm an enormous pea-jacket with horn buttons; and as he brought no luggage with him save a small valise, and had altogether the appearance of the bold smugglers who surreptitiously vend cigars and silk-handkerchiefs, the hall-porter at first refused him admittance; and it was not until the proprietor had been summoned, and after a close scrutiny and a whispered name had recognised his old customer, that the strange-looking visitor was ushered upstairs. He would have a private room, he said; and he did not want it known that he was back just yet — did Jubber understand? If any body called, that was another matter: he expected his mother and one or two others; but he did not want it put in the papers, or any thing of that kind. Jubber did understand, and left Captain Lionel Brakespere to himself.

Captain Lionel Brakespere, just at that time, could have had no worse company. He had been bored to death by the terrible monotony of a long sea-voyage, and had found on landing in England

that his boredom was by no means at an end. He had heard from his mother that "that awkward business had all been squared," as he phrased it; and that it was desirable he should return home at once, where there was a chance of a marriage by which "a big something was to be pulled off," as he phrased it again. So he had come back, and there he was at Long's; but as yet he was by no means happy. He was doubtful as to his position in society, as to how much of his escapade was known, as to whether he would be all right with his former set, or whether he would get the cold-shoulder, and perhaps be cut. He could only learn this by seeing Algy Barford, or some other fellow of the *clique;* and every fellow was of course out of town at that infernal time of year. He must wait, at all events, until he had seen his mother, to whom he had sent word of his arrival. He might be able to learn something of all this from her. Meantime he had taken a private room; not that there was much chance of his meeting any one in the coffee-room, but some fellow might perhaps stop there for the night on his way through town; and he had sent for the tailor, and the hair-cutter fellow, and that sort of thing, and was going to be made like a Christian again — not like the cad he'd looked like in that infernal place out there.

He lounged round the room, and pulled his beard and yawned as he looked out of the window; pulling himself together afterwards by stretching out his hands and arms; and shrugging his shoulders and shaking himself, as if endeavouring to shake off depression. He *was* depressed; there was no doubt

about it. Out there it was well enough. He had been out there just long enough to have begun to settle down into his new life, to have forgotten old ties and old feelings; but here every thing jarred upon him. He was back in England certainly, but back in England in a condition which he had never known before. In the old days, at this time of year, he would have been staying down at some country-house, or away in some fellow's yacht, enjoying himself to the utmost; thoroughly appreciated and highly thought of, — a king among men and a favourite among women. Now he was cooped up in this deserted beastly place, which every one decent had fled from, not daring even to go out and see whether some old comrade, haply retained in town by duty, were not to be picked up, from whom he could learn the news, with whom he might have a game of billiards, or something to get through the infernally dragging wearisome time. He expected his mother. She was his truest and stanchest friend, after all, and had behaved splendidly to him all through this terrible business. It was better that she should come down there, and let him know exactly how the land lay. He would have gone home, but he did not know what sort of a reception he might have met with from the governor; and from all he could make out from his mother's letters, it was very likely that Caterham might cut up rough, and say or do something confoundedly unpleasant. It was an infernal shame of Caterham, and just like his straitlaced nonsense — that it was. Was not he the eldest son, and what did he want more? It was

all deuced well for him to preach and moralise, and all that sort of thing; but his position had kept him out of temptation, else he might not be any better than other poor beggars, who had fallen through and come to grief.

So he reasoned with himself as he lounged round and round the room; and at last began to consider that he was a remarkably ill-used person. He began to hate the room and its furniture, altered the position of the light and elegant little couch, flung himself into the arm-chair, drumming his heels upon the floor, and rose from it leaving the chintz covering all tumbled, and the anti-macassar all awry, drummed upon the window, stared at the prints already inspected — the "Hero and his Horse," which led him into reminiscences of seeing the old Duke with his white duck trousers and his white cravat, with the silver buckle gleaming at the back of his bowed head, at Eton on Montem days — glanced with stupid wonderment at Ward's "Dr. Johnson reading the Manuscript of the *Vicar of Wakefield*," which conveyed to him no idea whatsoever — looked at a proof of "Hogarth painting the Muse of Comedy," and wondered "who was the old cock with the fat legs, drawing." He watched the few people passing through the streets, the very few hansom cabs with drivers listlessly creeping up and down, as though conscious that the chances of their being hired were dismally remote, the occasional four-wheelers with perambulators and sand-spades on the top, and bronzed children leaning out of the windows, talking of the brief holiday over and the work-a-day life about

to recommence — he watched all this, and, watching worked himself up to such a pitch of desperation that he had almost determined to brave all chances of recognition, and sally forth into the streets, when the door opened, and a waiter entering, told him that a lady was waiting to speak with him.

His mother had come at last, then? Let her be shown up directly.

Of all things Lionel Brakespere abhorred a "scene;" and this was likely to be an uncommonly unpleasant meeting. The Mater was full of feeling and that sort of thing, and would probably fling herself into his arms as soon as the waiter was gone, and cry, and sob, and all that sort of thing, and moan over him — make a fellow look so confoundedly foolish and absurd, by Jove! Must get that over as soon as possible — all the hugging and that — and then find out how matters really stood. So he took up his position close to the door; and as the footsteps approached, was a little astonished to hear his heart thumping so loudly.

The door opened, and passing the bowing waiter, who closed it behind her, a lady entered. Though her veil was down, Lionel saw instantly that it was not his mother. A taller, younger woman, with step graceful though hurried, an eager air, a strange nervous manner. As the door closed, she threw up her veil and stood revealed — Margaret!

He fell back a pace or two, and the blood rushed to his heart, leaving his face as pale as hers. Then, recovering himself, he caught hold of the table, and glaring at her, said hoarsely, "You here!"

There was something in his tone which jarred upon her instantly. She made a step forward, and held out her hand appealingly — "Lionel," she said quite softly, "Lionel, you know me?"

"Know you?" he repeated. "O yes — I — I have that honour. I know you fast enough — though what you do here I *don't* know. What do you do here?"

"I came to see you."

"Devilish polite, I'm sure. But — now you have seen me —" he hesitated and smiled. Not a pleasant smile by any means: one of those smiles in which the teeth are never shown. A very grim smile, which slightly wrinkled the lips, but left the eyes hard and defiant; a smile which Margaret knew of old, the sight of which recalled the commencement of scenes of violent passion and bitter upbraiding in the old times; a smile at sight of which Margaret's heart sank within her, only leaving her strength enough to say: "Well!"

"Well!" he repeated — "having seen me — having fulfilled the intention of your visit — had you not better — go?"

"Go!" she exclaimed — "leave you at once, without a look, without a word! Go! after all the long weary waiting, this hungering to see and speak with you, to pillow my head on your breast, and twine my arms round you as I used to do in the dear old days! Go! in the moment when I am repaid for O such misery as you, Lionel, I am sure, cannot imagine I have endured — the misery of ab-

sence from you; the misery of not knowing how or where you were — whether even you were dead or alive; misery made all the keener by recollection of joy which I had known and shared with you. Go! Lionel, dearest Lionel, you cannot mean it! Don't try me now, Lionel; the delight at seeing you again has made me weak and faint. I am not so strong as I used to be. Lionel dearest, don't try me too much."

Never had she looked more beautiful than now. Her arms were stretched out in entreaty, the rich tones of her voice were broken, tears stood in her deep-violet eyes, and the dead-gold hair was pushed off the dead-white brow. Her whole frame quivered with emotion — emotion which she made no attempt to conceal.

Lionel Brakespere had seated himself on the corner of the table, and was looking at her with curiosity. He comprehended the beauty of the picture before him, but he regarded it as a picture. On most other men in his position such an appeal from such a woman would have caused at least a temporary rekindling of the old passion; on him it had not the slightest effect, beyond giving him a kind of idea that the situation was somewhat ridiculous and slightly annoying. After a minute's interval he said, with his hands in his pockets, and his legs swinging to and fro:

"It's deuced kind of you to say such civil things about me, and I appreciate them — appreciate them, I assure you. But, you see the fact of the matter is, that I'm expecting my mother every minute, and

if she were to find you here, I should be rather awkwardly situated."

"O," cried Margaret, "you don't think I would compromise you, Lionel? You know me too well for that. You know too well how I always submitted to be kept in the background — only too happy to live on your smiles, to know that you were fêted and made much of."

"O, yes," said Lionel, simply; "you were always a deuced sensible little woman."

"And I sha'n't be in the way, and I sha'n't bore you. They need know nothing of my existence, if you don't wish it, any more than they used. And we shall lead again the dear old life — eh, Lionel?"

"Eh!" repeated he in rather a high key, — "the dear old life!"

"Ah, how happy I was!" said Margaret. "You, whose intervening time has been passed in action, can scarcely imagine how I have looked back on those days, — how eagerly I have longed for the time to come when I might have them again."

"Gad!" said he, "I don't exactly know about my time being passed in action. It's been horribly ghastly and melancholy, and deuced unpleasant, if you mean that."

"Then we will both console ourselves for it now, Lionel. We will forget all the misery we have suffered, and —"

"Y-es!" said he, interrupting her, swinging his leg a little more slowly, and looking quietly up into her face; "I don't exactly follow you in all this."

"You don't follow me?"

"N-no! I scarcely think we can be on the same tack, somehow."

"In what way?"

"In all this about leading again the old life, and living the days over again, and consoling ourselves, and that kind of thing."

"You don't understand it?"

"Well, I don't know about understanding it. All I mean to say is, I'm not going to have it."

But for something in his tone, Margaret might not have entirely comprehended what he sought to convey in his words, so enraptured was she at seeing him again. But in his voice, in his look, there was a bravado that was unmistakable. She clapsed her hands together in front of her; and her voice was very low and tremulous, as she said,

"Lionel, what do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Well, it's a devilish awkward thing to say—I can't conceive how it came about—all through your coming here, and that sort of thing; but it appears to me that, as I said before, you're on the wrong tack. You don't seem to see the position."

"I don't indeed. For God's sake speak out!"

"There, you see! — that's just it; like all women, taking the thing so much in earnest, and —"

"So much in earnest? Is what would influence one's whole life a thing to be lightly discussed or laughed over? Is —"

"There you are again! That's exactly what I complain of. What have I to do with influencing your life?"

"All — every thing!"

"I did not know it, then, by Jove, — that's all I've got to say. You're best out of it, let me tell you. My influence is a deuced bad one, at least for myself."

Once again the tone, reckless and defiant, struck harshly on her ear. He continued, "I was saying you did not seem to see the position. You and I were very good friends once upon a time, and got on very well together; but that would never do now."

She turned faint, sick, and closed her eyes; but remained silent.

"Wouldn't do a bit," he continued. "You know I've been a tremendous cropper — must have thought deuced badly of me for cutting off in that way; but it was my only chance, by Jove; and now I've come back to try and make all square. But I must keep deuced quiet and mind my p's and q's, or I shall go to grief again, like a bird."

She waited for a moment, and then she said faintly and slowly, "I understand you thoroughly now. You mean that it would be better for us to remain apart for some time yet?"

"For some time! — yes. Confound it all Margaret! — you won't take a hint, and you make a fellow speak out and seem cruel and unkind, and all that kind of thing, that he does not want to. Look here. You ought never to have come here at all. It's impossible we can ever meet again."

She started convulsively; but even then she seemed unable to grasp the truth. Her earnestness brought the colour flying to her cheeks as she said

hurriedly, "Why impossible, Lionel, — why impossible? If you are in trouble, who has such a right to be near you as I? If you want assistance and solace, who should give it you before me? That is the mistake you made, Lionel. When you were in your last trouble you should have confided in me: my woman's wit might have helped you through it; or at the worst, my woman's love would have consoled you in it."

She was creeping closer to him, but stopped as she saw his face darken and his arms clasp themselves across his breast.

"D—n it all!" said he petulantly; "you *won't* understand, I think. This sort of thing is impossible. Any sort of love, or friendship, or trust is impossible. I've come back to set myself straight, and to pull out of all the infernal scrapes I got myself into before I left; and there's only one way to do it."

"And that is —"

"Well, if you will have it, you must. And that is — by making a good marriage."

She uttered a short sharp cry, followed by a prolonged wail, such as a stricken hare gives. Lionel Brakespere looked up at her; but his face never relaxed, and his arms still remained tightly folded across his breast. Then she spoke, very quietly and very sadly:

"By making a good marriage! Ah! — then I see it all. That is why you are annoyed at my having come to you. That is why you dread the sight of me, because it reminds you that I am in the

way; reminds you of the existence of the clog round your neck that prevents your taking up this position for which you long; because it reminds you that you once sacrificed self to sentiment, and permitted yourself to be guided by love instead of ambition. That is what you mean?"

His face was darker than ever as he said, "No such d—d nonsense. I don't know what you're talking about; no more do you, I should think, by the way in which you are going on. What *are* you talking about?"

He spoke very fiercely; but she was not cowed or dashed one whit. In the same quiet voice she said: "I am talking about myself — your wife!"

Lionel Brakespere sprung from the corner of the table on which he had been sitting, and stood upright, confronting her.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" in a hard low voice. "That's your game, eh? I thought it was coming to that. Now, look here," shaking his fist at her, — "drop that for good and all; drop it, I tell you, or it will be the worse for you. Let me hear of your saying a word about your being my wife, and, so help me God, I'll be the death of you! That's plain, isn't it? You understand that?"

She never winced; she never moved. She sat quietly under the storm of his rage; and when he had finished speaking, she said:

"You can kill me, if you like, — you very nearly did, just before you left me, — but so long as I am alive I shall be your wife!"

"Will you, by George? — not if there's law in

the land, I can tell you. What have you been doing all this time? How have you been living since I've been away? How do you come here, dressed like a swell as you are, when I left you without money? I shall want to know all that; and I'll find out, you may take your oath. There are heaps of ways of discovering those things now, and places where a fellow has only to pay for it, and he may know any thing that goes on about any body. I don't think you would particularly care to have those inquiries made about *you*, eh?"

She was silent. He waited a minute; then, thinking from her silence that he had made a point, went on:

"You understand me at last, don't you? You see pretty plainly, I should think, that being quiet and holding your tongue is your best plan, don't you? If you're wise you'll do it; and then, when I'm settled, I may make you some allowance — if you want it, that's to say, — if your friends who've been so kind to you while I've been away don't do it. But if you open your mouth on this matter, if you once hint that you've any claim on me, or send to me, or write to me, or annoy me at all, I'll go right in at once, find out all you've been doing, and then see what they'll say to you in the Divorce Court. You hear?"

Still she sat perfectly silent. He was apparently pleased with his eloquence and its effect, for he proceeded:

"This is all your pretended love for me, is it? This is what you call gratitude to a fellow, and all that kind of thing? Turning up exactly when you're not wanted, and coolly declaring that you're going

in to spoil the only game that can put me right and bring me home! And this is the woman who used to declare in the old days that she'd die for me, and all that! I declare I didn't think it of you, Madge!"

"Don't call me by that name!" she screamed, roused at last; "don't allude to the old days, in God's name, or I shall go mad! The recollection of them, the hope of their renewal, has been my consolation in all sorts of misery and pain. I thought that to hear them spoken of by you would have been sufficient recompense for all my troubles: now to hear them mentioned by your lips agonises and maddens me; I —"

"This is the old story," he interrupted; "you haven't forgotten that business, I see. This is what you used to do before, when you got into one of these states. It frightened me at first, but I got used to it; and I've seen a great deal too much of such things to care for it now, I can tell you. If you make this row, I'll ring the bell — upon my soul I will!"

"O, Lionel, Lionel!" said Margaret, stretching out her hands in entreaty towards him — "don't speak so cruelly! You don't know all I have gone through for you — you don't know how weak and ill I am. But it is nothing to what I will do. You don't know how I love you, Lionel, my darling! — how I have yearned for you; how I will worship and slave for you, so that I may only be with you. I don't want to be seen, or heard of, or known, so long as I am near you. Only try me and trust me, only let me be your own once more."

"I tell you it's impossible," said he petulantly. "Woman, can't you understand? I'm ruined, done, shut up, cornered, and the only chance of my getting through is by my marriage with some rich woman, who will give me her money in exchange for — There, d—n it all, — it's no use talking any more about it. If you can't see the position, I can't show it you any stronger; and there's an end of it. Only, look here! — keep your mouth shut, or it will be the worse for you. You understand that? — the worse for you."

"Lionel!" She sprang towards him and clasped her hands round his arm. He shook her off roughly, and moved towards the door.

"No more foolery," he said in a low deep voice. "Take my warning now, and go. In a fortnight's time you can write to me at the Club, and say whether you are prepared to accept the conditions I have named. Now, go."

He held the door open, and she passed by him and went out. She did not shrink, or faint, or fall. Somehow, she knew not how, she went down the stairs and into the street. Not until she had hailed a cab, and seated herself in it, and was being driven off, did she give way. Then she covered her face with her hands, and burst into a passionate fit of weeping, rocking herself to and fro, and exclaiming, "And it is for this that I have exiled myself from my home, and trampled upon a loving heart! O my God! my God! if I could only have loved Geoffrey Ludlow! — O, to love as I do, such a man as this!"

CHAPTER III.

Gone to his Rest.

The last-mentioned interview between Lord Caterham and his mother, though productive of good in a certain way — for Lady Beauport, however bravely she succeeded in bearing herself at the time, was in reality not a little frightened at her son's determination — had a visibly bad effect on Caterham's health. The excitement had been too much for him. The physician had enjoined perfect rest, and an absence of all mental effort, in the same way in which they prescribe wine and nourishing food to the pauper, or Turkish baths to the cripple on the outskirts of Salisbury Plain. Perfect rest and absence of all mental effort were utterly impossible to Caterham, whose mind was on the rack, who knew that he had pitted himself against time for the accomplishment of his heart's desire, and who felt that he must either fulfil his earnest intention, or give up it and life simultaneously. Life was so thin and faint and feeble within him, that he needed all of it he could command to bear him up merely through "the fever called living," — to keep him together sufficiently to get through the ordinary quiet routine of his ever-dull day. When there was an exceptional occasion — such as the interview with his mother, for instance, where he had gone through a vast amount of excitement — it left him exhausted, powerless, incapable

of action or even of thought, to an extent that those accustomed only to ordinary people could never have imagined.

The next day he was too ill to leave his bed; but that made little difference to the rest of the household. Lord Beauport was away in Wales looking after some mines on one of his estates, which had suddenly promised to be specially productive. Lady Beauport, detained in town for the due carrying out of her plans with respect to Lionel, sent down her usual message of inquiry by Timpson her maid, who communicated with Stephens, and gave the reply to her mistress. Lady Beauport repeated the message, "Very unwell indeed, eh?" and adding, "this weather is so horribly depressing," proceeded with her toilette. Miss Maurice sent grapes and flowers and some new perfume to the invalid; and — it revived him more than any thing else — a little hurried note, bidding him not give way to depression, but rouse sufficiently to get into his easy-chair by the morrow, and she would spend all the day with him, and read to him, and play to him whatever he wanted.

He had strength enough to raise that little note to his lips so soon as he heard the door shut behind the outgoing Stephens; to kiss it over and over again, and to place it beneath his pillow ere he sunk into such imitation of rest as was vouchsafed to him. A want of sleep was one of the worst symptoms of his malady, and the doctors had all agreed that if they could only superinduce something like natural sleep, it might aid greatly in repairing the little

strength which had been given to him originally, and which was so gradually and imperceptibly, and yet so surely, wearing away. But that seemed to be impossible. When he was first assisted to bed he was in a sufficiently drowsy state, partly from the fatigue of the day, partly from the effect of the wine, of which the doctors insisted on his taking a quantity which would have been nothing to an ordinary man, but was much to one feeble in frame, and unable to take any exercise to carry off its strength. Then, after a short slumber — heavy, stertorous, and disturbed — he would wake, bright and staring, without the smallest sign of sleep in his head or in his eye. In vain would he toss from side to side, and try all the known recipes for somnolence — none were of the slightest avail. He could not sleep, he could not compose himself in the least degree, he could not empty his mind as it were; and the mind must be, or at all events must seem, empty before sleep will take possession of it. Lord Caterham's mind in the dead silence of the night was even more active than it was in the daytime. Before him rose up all the difficulties which he had to surmount, the dangers which he had to avoid, the hopes and fears and triumphs and vexations which made up the sum of his bitter life. They were not many now, — they never had been diffuse at any time; so little had Caterham been a citizen of the world, that all his aspirations had lain within a very small compass, and now they centred in one person — Annie Maurice. To provide for her safety when he was not there to look after it in person; to leave such records

as would show what action he had taken in her behalf, and on what grounds that action had been undertaken; to arm some competent and willing person so thoroughly to bestir himself at the necessary juncture as to prevent the chance of the conspiracy against Annie's future being carried into effect: — these were the night-thoughts which haunted Caterham's couch, and rendered him sleepless.

Sleeplessness had its usual effect. The following day he was quite worn out in mind and body, — felt it, knew it, could not deny the fact when it was suggested to him mildly by Stephens, more firmly by his doctors, — but yet persevered in his intention of getting up. He was sure he should be so much better out of bed; he was certain that a change — were it only to his easy-chair — would do him so much good. He could be very positive — "obstinate" was the phrase by which the doctors distinguished it, "arbitrary" was Stephens's phrase — when he chose; and so they let him have his way, wondering why he preferred to leave the calm seclusion of his bed. They little knew that the contents of that little note which the valet had seen protruding from the corner of his master's pillow when he went in to call him in the morning had worked that charm; they did not know that she had promised to spend the day with him, and read and play to him. But he did; and had he died for it, he could not have denied himself that afternoon of delight.

So he was dressed, and wheeled into his sitting-room, and placed by his desk and among his books. He had twice nearly fainted during the process; and

Stephens, who knew his every look, and was as regardful of his master's health as the just appreciation of a highly-paid place could make him, had urged Lord Caterham to desist and return to his bed. But Caterham was obstinate; and the toilette was performed and the sitting-room gained, and then he desired that Miss Maurice might be told he was anxious to see her.

She came in an instant. Ah, how radiant and fresh she looked as she entered the room! Since the end of the season, she had so far assumed her heiress position as to have a carriage of her own and a saddle-horse; and instead of accompanying Lady Beauport in her set round of "airing," Annie had taken long drives into country regions, where she had alighted and walked in the fresh air, duly followed by the carriage; or on horseback, and attended by her groom, had galloped off to Hampstead and Highgate and Willesden and Ealing in the early morning, long before Lady Beauport had thought of unclosing her eyes. It was this glorious exercise, this enjoyment of heaven's light and air and sun, that had given the rose to Annie's cheeks and the brilliance to her eyes. She was freckled here and there; and there was a bit of a brown mark on her forehead, showing exactly how much was left unshaded by her hat. These were things which would have distressed most well-regulated Belgravian damsels; but they troubled Annie not one whit; and as she stood close by his chair, with her bright eyes and her pushed-off brown hair, and the big teeth gleaming in her fresh wholesome mouth, Caterham

thought he had never seen her look more charming, and felt that the distance between her, brimming over with health, and him, gradually succumbing to disease, was greater than ever.

Annie Maurice was a little shocked when she first glanced at Caterham. The few days which had intervened since she had been to his room had made a great difference in his appearance. His colour had not left him — on the contrary, it had rather increased — but there was a tight look about the skin, a dull glassiness in his eyes, and a pinched appearance in the other features, which were unmistakable. Of course she took no notice of this: but coming in, greeted him in her usual affectionate manner. Nor was there any perceptible difference in his voice as he said:

"You see I have kept you to your word, Annie. You promised, if I were in my easy-chair, that you would play and read to me; and here I am."

"And here I am to do your bidding, Arthur; and too delighted to do it, and to see you sufficiently well to be here. You're not trying too much, are you, Arthur?"

"In what, Annie?"

"In sitting up and coming into this room. Are you strong enough to leave your bed?"

"Ah, I am so weary and wretched alone, Annie. I long so for companionship, for —" he checked himself and said, "for some one to talk, to read, to keep me company in all the long hours of the day. I'm not very bright just now, and even I have been stronger — which seems almost ridiculous — but I

could keep away no longer, knowing you would come to lighten my dreariness."

Though his voice was lower and more faint than usual, there was an impassioned tone in it which she had never heard before, and which jarred ever so slightly on her ear. So she rose from her seat, and laughingly saying that she would go at once and perform part of her engagement, sat down at the piano, and played and sang such favourite pieces of his as he had often been in the habit of asking for. They were simple ballads, — some of Moore's melodies, Handel's "Harmonious Blacksmith," and some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, — all calm, soft, soothing music, such as Caterham loved; and when Annie had been playing for some time he said:

"You don't know how I love to hear you, Annie! You're getting tired now, child."

"Not in the least degree, Arthur. I could go on singing all day, if it amused you."

"It does more than amuse me, Annie. I cannot describe to you the feeling that comes over me in listening to your singing; nothing else has such a calm, holy, sanctifying influence on me. Listening to you, all the petty annoyances, the carking cares of this world fade away, and —"

He ceased speaking suddenly; and Annie looking round, saw the tears on his cheek. She was about to run to him, but he motioned her to keep her seat, and said: "Annie dear, you recollect a hymn that I heard you sing one night when you first came here? — one Sunday night when they

were out, and you and I sat alone in the twilight in the drawing-room? Ah, I scarcely knew you then, but that hymn made a great impression on me."

"You mean —

'Abide with me! fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide!'"

"Yes, that is it. How lovely it is! — both words and music, I think."

"Yes, it is lovely. It was written by a Mr. Lyte, when he was —"

She checked herself, but he finished the sentence for her, — "When he was dying. Yes; I recollect your telling me so that night. Sing it for me, dear."

She turned to the piano at once, and in an instant the rich deep tones of her voice were ringing through the room. Annie Maurice sang ballads sweetly, but she sang hymns magnificently. There was not the slightest attempt at ornamentation or *bravura* in her performance, but she threw her whole soul into her singing; and the result was rich and solemn melody. As she sang, she seemed to embody the spirit of the composer, and her voice vibrated and shook with the fervour which animated her.

Half leaning on his stick, half reclining in his chair, Caterham watched her in rapt delight; then when she had finished, and ere the thrilling music of her voice had died away, he said: "Thanks, dear — again a thousand thanks! Now, once more a request, Annie. I shall not worry you much more, my child."

"Arthur," — and in an instant she was by his

side, — "if you speak like that, I declare I will not sing to you."

"O yes, you will, Annie dear! — O yes, you will. You know as well as I do that — Well, then" — obedient to a forefinger uplifted in warning — "I'll say no more on that point. But I want you now to sing me the old-fashioned Evening Hymn. I've a very ancient love for dear old Bishop Ken, and I don't like to think of his being set aside for any modern hymnologist, — even for such a specimen as that you have just sung. Sing me 'Glory to Thee,' Annie, — that is, if you are old-fashioned enough to know it."

She smiled, and sang. When she ceased, finding that he remained speechless and motionless, she went up to him, fearing that he had fainted. He was lying back in his chair perfectly quiet, with his eyes closed. When she touched him, he opened them dreamily, saying, "'That I may dread the grave as little as my bed.' Yes, yes! — Ah, Annie dear, you've finished! — and to think that you, a modern young lady, should be able to sing old Bishop Ken without book! Where did you learn him?"

"When I was a very little child, — at the Priory, Arthur. Geoffrey Ludlow — as I've told you, I think — used to come out to us every Sunday; and in the evening after dinner, before I went to bed, he used to ask for his little wife to sing to him. And then poor papa used to tell me to sit on Geoff's knee, and I used to sing the Evening Hymn."

"Ay," said Caterham in an absent manner,

"Geoffrey Ludlow's little wife! Geoffrey Ludlow's little wife! — ay, ay! 'That so I may, rise glorious at Thine awful day!' In Thy mercy, in Thy mercy!" and saying this, he fainted away.

That evening Algy Barford, at Lord Dropmore's in Lincolnshire, on his return from shooting, found a telegram on his dressing-room table. It was from Annie Maurice, and begged his immediate return to town.

Lord Caterham was better the next day. Though still very weak, he insisted on being dressed and wheeled into his sitting-room. Once there, he had his despatch-box placed before him, and the writing-materials put ready to his hand. Of late he had occasionally been in the habit of employing an amanuensis. Annie Maurice had frequently written from his dictation; and when she had been engaged, a son of the old housekeeper, who was employed at a law-stationer's, and who wrote a hand which was almost illegible from its very clearness, had sometimes been pressed into the service. But now Lord Caterham preferred writing for himself. Annie had sent to beg him to rest; and in reply he had scrawled two lines, saying that he was ever so much better, and that he had something to do which must be done, and which when done would leave him much happier and easier in mind. So they left him to himself; and Stephens, looking in from time to time, as was his wont, reported to the servants'-hall that his master was "at it as hard as ever — still a-writin'!" They wondered what could thus occupy him, those curious domestics. They

knew exactly the state in which he was, the feeble hold that he had on life; — what do they not know, those London servants? — and they thought that he was making his will, and speculated freely among themselves as to what would be the amount of Stephens's inheritance; and whether it would be a sum of money "down," or an annuity; and whether Stephens would invest it after the usual fashion of their kind — in a public-house, or whether, from excessive gentility, he was not "a cut above that." Lord Caterham would not hold out much longer, they opined; and then Mr. Lionel would come in for his title; and who Mr. Lionel was — inquired about by the new servants, and the description of Mr. Lionel by the old servants — and mysterious hints as to how, in the matter of Mr. Lionel, there had been a "screw loose" and a "peg out;" how he was a "regular out-and-out fast lot," and had had to "cut it;" — all this occasioned plenty of talk in the servants'-hall, and made the dreary autumn-day pass quite pleasantly. And still the sick man sat at his desk, plying his pen, with but rare intervals of rest — intervals during which he would clasp his poor aching head, and lift his shrivelled attenuated hands in earnest silent prayer.

The Beauport houshold was sunk in repose the next morning, when a sharp ring at the bell, again and again repeated, aroused the young lady who as kitchen-maid was on her preferment, and whose dreams of being strangled by the cook for the

heaviness of her hand in an omelette were scared by the shrill clanging of the bell which hung immediately over her head. The first notion of "fire" had calmed down into an idea of "sweeps" by the time that she had covered her night-attire with a dingy calico robe known to her as her "gownd;" and she was tottering blindly down stairs before she recollected that no sweeps had been ordered, and thought that it was probably a "runaway." But lured perhaps by a faint idea that it might be the policeman, she descended; and after an enormous amount of unbolting and unchaining, found herself face-to-face with a fresh-coloured, light-bearded, cheery gentleman, who wore a Glengarry cap, had a travelling-rug in his hand, was smoking a cigar, and had evidently just alighted from a hansom-cab which was standing at the door, and the driver of which was just visible behind a big portmanteau and a gun-case. The fresh-coloured gentleman was apparently rather startled at the apparition of the kitchen-maid, and exclaimed, apparently involuntarily, "Gad!" in a very high key. Recovering himself instantly, he asked how Lord Caterham was. Utterly taken aback at discovering that the visitor was not the policeman, the kitchen-maid was floundering about heavily for an answer, when she was more than ever disconcerted at seeing the fresh-coloured gentleman tear off his Glengarry-cap and advance up the steps with outstretched hand. These demonstrations were not made in honour of the kitchen-maid, but of Annie Maurice, who had been aroused from her usual light sleep by the ring, and

who, guessing at the visitor, had come down in her dressing-gown to see him.

They passed into the dining-room, and then he took her hand and said: "I only got your telegram at dinner-time last-night, my dear Miss Maurice, and came off just as I was. Dropmore — deuced civil of him — drove me over to the station himself hard as he could go, by Jove! just caught mail-train, and came on from King's Cross in a cab. It's about Caterham, of course. Bad news, — ay, ay, ay! He — poor — I can't say it — he's in danger, he —" And brave old Algy stopped, his handsome jolly features all tightened and pinched in his anxiety.

"He is very ill, very ill, dear Mr. Barford, — very ill; and I wanted you to see him. I don't know — I can't tell why — but I think he may possibly have something on his mind — something which he would not like to tell me, but which he might feel a relief in confiding to some one else; and as you, I know, are a very dear and valued friend of his, I think we should all like you to be that some one. That was what made me send for you."

"I'm — I'm not a very good hand at eloquence, Miss Maurice — might put pebbles in my mouth and shout at the sea-shore and all that kind of thing, like the — the celebrated Greek person, you know — and wouldn't help me in getting out a word; but though I can't explain, I feel very grateful to you for sending for me, to see — dear old boy!" The knot which had been rising in

Algy Barford's throat during this speech had grown nearly insurmountable by this time, and there were two big tears running down his waistcoat. He tried to pull himself together as he said: "If he has any thing to say, which he would like to say to me — of course — I shall — any thing that would — God bless him, my dear old boy! — good, patient, dear darling old boy, God bless him!" The thought of losing his old friend flashed across him in all its dread heart-wringing dreariness, and Algy Barford fairly broke down and wept like a child. Recovering himself after a moment, he seized Annie's hand, and muttering something to the effect that he would be back as soon as he had made himself a little less like an Esquimaux, he dashed into the cab and was whirled away.

You would scarcely have thought that Algy Barford had had what is called sleep, but what really is a mixture of nightmare and cramp in a railway carriage, had you seen him at eleven o'clock, when he next made his appearance in St. Barnabas Square, so bright and fresh and radiant was he. He found Annie Maurice awaiting his arrival, and had with her a short earnest conversation as to Caterham's state. From that he learned all. The doctors had a very bad opinion of their patient's state: it was — hum — ha! — Yes — you know! — general depression — a want of vitality, which — just now — looking at his normal lack of force, of what we call professionally *vis vitæ*, might — eh? Yes, no doubt, serious result. Could not be positively stated whether he would not so far recover

— pull through, as it is called — rally, as we say, as to — remain with us yet some time; but in these cases there was always — well, yes, it must be called a risk. This was the decision which the doctors had given to Annie, and which she, in other words, imparted to Algy Barford, who, coupling it with his experience of the guarded manner in which fashionable physicians usually announced their opinions, felt utterly hopeless, and shook his head mournfully. He tried to be himself, to resume his old smile and old confident buoyant way; he told his dear Miss Maurice that she must hope for the best; that these doctor-fellows, by Jove, generally knew nothing; half of them died suddenly themselves, without even having anticipated their own ailments; "physician, heal thyself," and all that sort of thing; that probably Caterham wanted a little rousing, dear old boy; which rousing he would go in and give him. But Annie marked the drooping head and the sad despondent manner in which he shrugged his shoulders and plunged his hands into his pockets when he thought she had retired — marked also how he strove to throw elasticity into his step and light into his face as he approached the door of Caterham's room.

It had been arranged between Algy and Annie Maurice that his was to have the appearance of a chance visit, so that when Stephens had announced him, and Lord Caterham had raised his head in wonder, Algy, who had by this time pulled himself together sufficiently, said: "Ah, ha! Caterham! — dear old boy! — thought you had got rid of us all

out of town, eh? — and were going to have it all to yourself! Not a bit of it, dear boy! These doctor-fellows tell you one can't get on without ozone. Don't know what that is — daresay they're right. All I know is, I can't get on without a certain amount of chimney-pot. Country, delicious fresh air, turf, heather, peat-bog, stubble, partridge, snipe, grouse — all deuced good; cows and pigs, and that kind of thing; get up early, and go to bed and snore; get red face and double-chin and awful weight — then chimney-pot required. I always know, bless you! Too much London season, get my liver as big as Strasburg goose's, you know — *foie gras* and feet nailed to a board, and that kind of thing; too much country, tight waistcoat, red face — awfully British, in point of fact. Then, chimney-pot. I'm in that state now; and I've come back to have a week's chimney-pot and blacks and generally cabbage-stalky street — and then I shall go away much better."

"You keep your spirits, Algy, wherever you are." The thin faint voice struck on Algy Barford's ear like a knell. He paused a minute and took a short quick gulp, and then said: "O yes, still the same stock on hand, Caterham. I could execute country orders, or supply colonial agencies even, with promptitude and despatch, I think. And you, Arthur — how goes it with you?"

"Very quietly, Algy, — very, very quietly, thank God! I've had no return of my old pain for some time, and the headache seems to have left me."

"Well, that's brave! We shall see you in your

chair out on the lawn at the hunt-breakfast at Homershams again this winter, Arthur. We shall —"

"Well, I scarcely think that. I mean, not perhaps as you interpret me; but — I scarcely think — However, there's time enough to think of that. Let's talk of nearer subjects. I'm so glad you chanced to come to town, Algy — so very glad. Your coming seems predestined; for it was only yesterday I was wishing I had you here."

"Tremendously glad I came, dear old boy! Chimney-pot attack fell in handy this time, at all events. What did you want, Arthur, old fellow? Not got a new leaning towards dogginess, and want me to go up to Bill George's? Do you recollect that Irish deerhound I got for you?"

"I recollect him well — poor old Connor. No, not a dog now. I want you to — just raise me a bit, Algy, will you? — a little bit: I am scarcely strong enough to — that's it. Ah, Algy, old fellow, how often in the long years that we have been chums have you lifted this poor wretched frame in your strong arms!"

It was a trial for a man of Algy Barford's big heart; but he made head against it even then, and said in a voice harder and drier than usual from the struggle, "How often have I brought my bemuddled old brains for you to take them out and pick them to pieces and clean them, and put them back into my head in a state to be of some use to me! — that's the question, dear old boy. How often have you supplied the match to light the tow inside my head — I've got deuced little outside now — and

sent me away with some idea of what I ought to do when I was in a deuce of a knot! Why, I recollect once when Lionel and I — what is it, dear old boy?"

"You remind me — the mention of that name — I wanted to say something to you, Algy, which oddly enough had — just reach me that bottle, Algy: thanks! — which —"

"Rest a minute, dear old boy; rest. You've been exerting yourself too much."

"No; I'm better now — only faint for a minute. What was I saying? — O, about Lionel. You recollect a letter which —" his voice was growing again so faint that Algy took up the sentence.

"Which I brought to you; a letter from Lionel, after he had — you know, dear old boy — board ship, and that kind of thing?"

"Yes, that is the letter I mean. You — you knew its contents, Algy?"

"Well, Arthur, I think I did — I — you know Lionel was very fond of me, and — used to be about with him, you know, and that kind of thing —"

"You knew his — his wife?"

"Wife, Gad, did he say? — Jove! Knew you were — dear me! — charming person — lady. Very beautiful — great friend of Lionel's; but not his wife, dear old boy — somebody else's wife."

"Somebody else's wife?"

"Yes; wonderful story. I've wanted to tell you, and, most extraordinary thing, something always interrupted. Friend of yours too: tall woman, red

hair, violet eyes — wife of painter-man — Good God, Arthur!"

Well might he start; for Lord Caterham threw his hands wildly above his head, then let them fall helplessly by his side. By the time Algy Barford had sprung to his chair, and passed his arms around him, the dying man's head had drooped on to his right shoulder, and his eyes were glazing fast.

"Arthur! dear Arthur! one instant! Let me call for help."

"No, Algy; leave us so; no one else. Only one who could — and she — better not — bless her! — better not. Take my hand, Algy, old friend — tried, trusted, dear old friend — always thoughtful, always affectionate — God bless you — Algy! Yes, kiss my forehead again. Ah, so happy! where the wicked cease from troubling and the — Yes, Lord, with me abide, with me abide! — the darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide!"

And as the last words fell faintly on Algy Barford's ears, the slight form which was lying in Algy Barford's arms, and on which the strong man's tears were falling like rain, slipped gradually out of his grasp — dead.

CHAPTER IV.

The Protracted Search.

Annie Maurice was aroused from the brooding loneliness in which she had sought refuge, in the first bewilderment and stupefaction of her grief, by a communication from Lord Beauport. All was over now; the last sad ceremonial had taken place; and the place which had known Arthur, in his patient suffering, in his little-appreciated gentleness and goodness, should know him no more for ever. The crippled form was gone, and the invalid-chair which had for so long supported it had been removed, by order of the housekeeper, to a receptacle for discarded articles of use or ornament. Lord and Lady Beauport were not likely to notice the circumstance, or to object to it if they did. The blinds were decorously drawn; the rooms were scrupulously arranged; every thing in them in its place, as though never to be used or handled any more. The books, the objects of art, the curious things which the dead man alone of all the house had understood and valued, had a staring lifeless look about them in the unaccustomed precision of their distribution; the last flowers which Annie had placed in the Venetian glasses had withered, and been thrown away by the notable housemaids. A ray of sunlight crept in at one side of the blind, and streamed upon the spot

where Arthur's head had fallen back upon his friend's arm, — ah, how short a time ago! — and yet all looked strange and changed, not only as if he had gone away for ever, but as if he had never been there at all. Annie had not gone into the rooms since he had left them for the last time; she had an instinctive feeling of how it would be, and she could not bear it yet; she knew that in nothing would there be so sharp a pang as in seeing the familiar things which had been so like him, grown so unlike. So, when her maid told her that Lord Beauport wished to see her immediately, she asked nervously where he was.

"In the library, Miss Annie," said her maid, and looked very pityingly at the purple eyelids and white face.

"Alone?"

No, his lordship was not alone; one of the lawyer gentlemen and her ladyship were with him.

Annie went slowly and reluctantly to the library. She did not think for a moment that Lord and Lady Beauport were indifferent to the death of their eldest son; on the contrary, she knew that the event had come upon them with a mighty shock, and that they had felt it, if not deeply, at least violently and keenly. But she had the faculty of vivid perception, and she used it intuitively; and in this case it told her that shame, self-detection, and remorse, — the vague uneasiness which besets all who cannot reckon with themselves to the full in the daylight of conscience, but, like the debtor called to an account, keep something back, — mingled largely with their

grief. It was not whole-hearted, lavish, sacred, like hers; it was not the grief which takes the spontaneous form of prayer, and chastens itself into submission, elevating and sanctifying the mind and character of the mourner. Annie knew, by that keen unreasoning instinct of hers, that while her sole and earnest desire was to keep the memory of her dead cousin green, recalling his words, his counsels, his wishes, — dwelling on his views of life and its duties, and preserving him in her faithful heart, for ever near her, as a living friend, — while her chosen thoughts would be of him, and her best consolation in memory, — his father and mother would forget him if they could. They mourned for him, but it was with captious impatient grief; there was a sting in every remembrance, every association, which they could not yet escape from, but would have put away if they had had the power. To them, sorrow for the dead was as a haunting enemy, to be outwitted and left behind as speedily as might be; to her it was a friend, cherished and dear, solemnly greeted, and piously entertained.

When Annie entered the library, she found that the "lawyer gentleman," whom her maid had mentioned, was the family solicitor, Mr. Knevitt, who was well known to her, and for whom Caterham had had much liking and respect. Lord Beauport and he were standing together beside a long table, strewn with papers, and on which stood a large despatch-box open, and, as she saw while she walked up the room, also full of papers. At some distance from the table, and in the shade, Lady Beauport was

seated, her hands clasped together in her lap, and her figure leaning completely back in the deep arm-chair she occupied. She looked very pale and worn, and her deep mourning was not becoming to her. Sharp contention of thought and feeling was going on under that calm exterior, — bitter pangs, in which vexation had a large share, as well as regret, and a sense that she was to be baffled in the future as she had been defeated in the past. Ay, the future, — she had begun to think of it already, or rather she had begun (when had she ever ceased?) to think of *him*. Lionel was the future to her. What if there were more trouble and opposition in store for her? What if Arthur (ah, poor fellow! he had never understood young men different from himself, and he was always hard on Lionel) had left any communication for his father, had written any thing touching the particulars of Lionel's career which he knew, and had warned her not to ask? Hitherto nothing of the sort had been found in the examination of Lord Caterham's papers instituted by Lord Beauport and Mr. Knevitt. There was a packet for Annie Maurice, indeed; they had found it an hour ago, and Lord Beauport had just sent for Annie in order to hand it over to her. Lady Beauport had, however, no apprehensions connected with this matter; the virtues of the dead and the vices of the living son (though she would not have given them their true name) secured her from feeling any. Whatever Lionel had done she felt convinced was not of a nature to be communicated to Annie, and Caterham would have guarded her with the utmost

caution from hearing any thing unfit for her ears. No, no; there was no danger in that quarter. Had she not felt sure, before this "dreadful thing" — as she called Lord Caterham's death to herself — happened, that the scrupulous delicacy of her son, where Annie was concerned, would be her best aid and defence against his defeat of her projects? The letter, the packet — whatever it might be called — was probably an effusion of feeling, a moral lecture on life, or a posthumous guide to studies, in which Arthur had desired to see his gentle and interesting cousin proficient.

So Lady Beauport looked at the packet as it lay on the table, close to the despatch-box, without the least anxiety, and fixed her impatient attention on the further investigation of the papers, continued by Lord Beauport and Mr. Knevitt. It was not until they had concluded as much of their melancholy task as they proposed to undertake that day, that the Earl sent the summons which brought Annie to the library.

He took up the packet as she drew near, and said, very sadly:

"This is for you, my dear."

"From — from Arthur?" she asked, in a trembling voice.

"Yes, Annie, — we found it among his papers."

She took it from him, looked at it, and sat down in a chair beside the table, but made no attempt to break the seal. Lady Beauport did not speak. The Earl resumed his conversation with Mr. Knevitt, and Annie sat still and silent for a few minutes. Then

she interrupted Lord Beauport by asking him if he required her for any thing further.

"No, my dear," he said kindly; "you may go away if you like. How weary you look!" he added, with a deep sigh. Still Lady Beauport spoke no word; but her keen unsympathetic eyes followed the girl's graceful figure and drooping head as she left the library.

Arrived at her own room, Annie opened the packet, which she felt was a sacred thing. Her departed friend had written to her, then, words which he intended her to read only when he should be no more; solemn counsel, very precious affection, a priceless legacy from the dead would no doubt be in the letter, whose folds felt so thick and heavy in her hand. She removed the outer cover, placing it carefully by her side, and found an enclosure directed to Geoffrey Ludlow, and merely a few lines to herself, in which the writer simply directed her to place the accompanying letter in Geoffrey's hands *herself*, and privately, as soon after it came into hers as possible.

Surprise and disappointment were Annie's first feelings. She looked forlornly enough at the meagre scrap of writing that was her share, and with some wonder at the letter — no doubt voluminous — which was Geoffrey's. What could it be about? Arthur and Ludlow had been good friends, it is true, and had entertained strong mutual respect; but she could not account for this solemn communication, implying so strange and absolute a confidence. She turned the letter over in her hands, she scrutinised

the address, the paper, the seal; then she rose and locked it carefully away, together with the note to herself in which it had been enclosed. "Give this letter *privately* to Ludlow," were Arthur's words; then, if he did not wish its delivery to be known, it was plain he wished to conceal its existence. If Lady Beauport should question her as to the contents of the packet? Well, she must either give an evasive answer, or refuse to answer at all; the alternative should be decided by the terms of the question. She could venture to refuse an answer to a question of Lady Beauport's now; her heiress-ship had secured her many immunities, that one among the rest.

Lord Beauport was right; Annie was weary, and looking so. The sickness and dreariness of a great grief were upon her, and she was worn out. The stillness of the great house was oppressive to her; and yet she shrank from the knowledge that that stillness was soon to pass away, that life would resume its accustomed course, and the dead be forgotten. By all but her; to her his memory should be ever precious, and his least wish sacred. Then she debated within herself how she should fulfil his last request. There were difficulties in the way. She could not tell Geoffrey to call on her yet, nor could she go to his house. Then she remembered that he had not written to her. She had forgotten, until then, that there had been no answer to the letter in which she told Geoffrey Ludlow of Caterham's death. Could a letter have come, and been overlooked? She rang for her maid and questioned

her, but she was positive no letter had been mislaid or forgotten. Several papers lay on her waiting-table; she turned them over, to satisfy herself, though nothing could be more improbable than that she should have overlooked a letter from her dear old friend. There was no such thing. Puzzled and vaguely distressed, Annie stood looking at the heap of notes, with her hands pressed on her throbbing temples; and her maid entreated her to lie down and rest, commenting, as Lord Beauport had done, upon her appearance. Annie complied; and the girl carefully darkened the room and left her. For a while she lay still, thinking how she was to convey the letter to Geoffrey, without delay, "as soon as possible," Arthur had said; but she soon dropped into the dull heavy sleep of grief and exhaustion.

It was late in the evening when she awoke, and she again eagerly inquired for letters. There were none, and Annie's surprise grew into uneasiness. She resolved to write to Ludlow again, to tell him that she had something of importance to communicate, without indicating its character. "He may tell Margaret, or not, as he pleases," she thought — "that is for him to decide. I daresay, if she sees my note, she will not feel any curiosity or interest about it. Poor Geoffrey!" And then the girl recalled all that Arthur had said of his suspicion and distrust of Ludlow's beautiful wife, and thought sorrowfully how large was his share in the loss they had sustained of such a friend. Something must be wrong, she thought, or Geoffrey would surely have written. In her sore grief she yearned for the true and ready

sympathy which she should have from him, and him alone. Stay; she would not only write, she would send her maid to inquire for Geoffrey, and Margaret, and the child. She could go early next morning in a cab, and be back before breakfast-hour. So Annie made this arrangement, wrote her note, got through a short hour or two in the great dreary drawing-room as best she could, and once more cried herself to the merciful sleep which in some degree strengthened her for the intelligence which awaited her in the morning.

She was aroused by her maid, who came hurriedly to her bedside, holding in her hand Annie's note to Ludlow. She started up, confused, yet sufficiently awake to be startled at the look in the girl's face.

"What is it?" she said faintly.

"O Miss Annie, dreadful, dreadful news! Mrs. Ludlow has gone away, nobody knows where, and Mr. Ludlow is raving mad, in brain-fever!"

Lord Caterham's letter lay for many days undisturbed in the receptacle in which Annie Maurice had placed it. Not yet was the confidence of the dead to be imparted to the living. He was to read that letter in time, and to learn from it much that the writer had never dreamed it could convey. Little had the two, who had lived in so near and pleasant an intimacy, dreamed of the fatal link which really, though unseen, connected them. This was the letter which, in due time, Annie Maurice deposited in Geoffrey's hands:

"My dear Ludlow, — I have felt for some time that for me 'the long disease called life' is wearing toward its cure. Under this conviction I am 'setting my house in order;' and to do so thoroughly, and enjoy peace of mind for the brief space which will remain to me when that is done, I must have recourse to your honest and trusty friendship. I have to bequeath to you two services to be done for me, and one confidence to be kept, until your discretion shall judge it expedient that it should be divulged. These two services are distinct, but cognate; and they concern one who is the dearest of all living creatures to me, and for whom I know you entertain a sincere and warm affection — I allude to Annie Maurice. The confidence concerns my unworthy brother, Lionel Brakespere.

"In the fortune left her by Mr. Ampthill, Annie has security against material ills, and is safe from the position of dependence, in which I never could bear to feel she must remain. This is an immense relief to my mind; but it has substituted a source of uneasiness, though of considerably less dimensions, for that which it has removed. When I wrote to you lately, asking you to come to me, it was with the intention of speaking to you on this subject; but as our interview has been accidentally prevented, I made up my mind to act in the matter myself, as long as I live, and to bequeath action after my death to you, as I am now doing. My brother is as worthless a man as there is on the face of the earth — heartless, depraved, unprincipled to an almost in-

credible degree, considering his early association with men and women of character. You have, I daresay, heard vaguely of certain disgraceful circumstances which forced him to leave the country, and which brought immeasurable distress upon us all.

"I need not enter into these matters: they have little to do with the thing that is pressing on my mind. If Lionel's vices had been hidden from society ever so discreetly, I was sufficiently aware of their existence to have shrunk with as much horror as I feel now from the idea of his becoming Annie's husband. Let me preface what I am about to say by assuring you that I do not entertain any such fear. I know Annie; and I am perfectly assured that for her pure, upright, intelligent, and remarkably clear-sighted nature such a man as Lionel, — whose profound and cynical selfishness is not to be hidden by external polish, and whose many vices have left upon him the *cachet* which every pure woman feels instinctively, even though she does not understand theoretically, — will never have any attraction. She knows the nature of the transaction which drove him from England; and such a knowledge would be sufficient protection for her, without the repulsion which I am satisfied will be the result of association with him. I would protect her from such association if I could, and while I live I do not doubt my power to do so. It will be painful to me to use it; but I do not mind pain for Annie's benefit. A sad estrangement always existed between Lionel and me; an estrangement increased on his side by contempt and dislike — which he expressed

in no measured terms — but on my part merely passive. The power which I possess to hinder his return to this house was put into my hands by himself — more, I believe, to wound me, and in the wanton malice and daring of his evil nature, than for the reason he assigned; but it is effectual, and I shall use it, as I can, without explanation. When I am gone, if needs be, some one must be enabled to use this power in my stead; and that person, my dear Ludlow, is you. I choose you for Annie's sake, for yours, and for my own. My mother designs to marry Lionel to Annie, and thus secure to him by marriage the fortune which his misconduct lost him by inheritance. With this purpose in view, she has summoned Lionel to England, and she proposes that he should return to this house. She and I have had a painful explanation, and I have positively declared that it cannot and shall not be. In order to convince her of the necessity of yielding the point, I have told her that I am in possession of particulars of Lionel's conduct, unknown to her and my father, which perfectly justify me in my declaration; and I have entreated her, for the sake of her own peace of mind, not to force me, by an attempt which can have no issue but failure, to communicate the disgraceful particulars. Lady Beauport has been forced to appear satisfied for the present; and matters are in a state of suspense.

"But this cannot last, and with my life it will come to an end. Lionel will return here, in my place, and bearing my name — the heir to an earldom; and the follies and crimes of the younger son

will be forgotten. Still Annie Maurice will be no less a brilliant match, and my mother will be no less anxious to bring about a marriage. I foresee misery to Annie — genteel persecution and utter friendlessness — unless you, Ludlow, come to her aid. With all its drawbacks, this is her fitting home; and you must not propose that she should leave it without very grave cause. But you must be in a position to preserve her from Lionel; you must hold the secret in your hand, as I hold it, which makes all schemes for such an accursed marriage vain — the secret which will keep the house she will adorn free from the pollution of his presence. When you hear that Lionel Brakespere is paying attention to Annie under his father's roof, go to Lord Beauport, and tell him that Lionel Brakespere is a married man.

"And now, my dear Ludlow, you know one of the services you are to do me when I am gone; and you are in possession of the confidence I desire to repose in you. To explain the other, I must give you particulars. When my brother left England, he sent me, by the hands of a common friend, a letter which he had written at Liverpool, and which, when I have made you acquainted with its contents, I shall destroy. I do not desire to leave its low ribaldry, its coarse contempt, its cynical wickedness, to shock my poor father's eyes, or to testify against my brother when I am gone.

"I enable you to expose him, in order to prevent unhappiness to one dear to us both; but I have no vindictive feeling towards him, and no eyes

but mine must see the words in which he taunts me with the physical afflictions to which he chooses to assign my 'notions of morality' and 'superiority to temptation.' Enough — the facts which the letter contains are these: As nearly as I can make out, four years ago he met and tried to seduce a young lady, only eighteen years old, at Tenby. Her virtue, I hope — he says her ambition — foiled him, and he ran away with the girl and married her. He called himself Leonard Brookfield; and she never knew his name or real position. He took her abroad for a time; then brought her to London, where she passed for his mistress among the men to whom he introduced her, and who were aware that she had no knowledge of his identity. He had left the army then, or of course she would have discovered it. When the crash came, he had left her, and he coolly told me, as he had next to nothing for himself, he had nothing for her. His purpose in writing to me was to inform me, as especially interested in the preservation of the family, that not only was there a wife in the case, but, to the best of his belief, a child also, to be born very soon; and as no one could say what would become of him, it might be as well to ascertain where the heir of the Beauports might be found, if necessary. He supposed I would keep the matter a secret, until it should become advisable, if ever, to reveal it. Mrs. Brakespere had no knowledge of her rights, and could not, therefore make herself obnoxious by claiming them. If I chose to give her some help, I should probably be rewarded by the consciousness of charity; but he ad-

vised me to keep the secret of our relationship for my own sake: she was perfectly well known as his mistress; and as they were both under a cloud at present, the whole thing had better be kept as dark as possible. I read this letter with the deepest disgust; the personal impertinence to myself I could afford to disregard, and was accustomed to; but the utter baseness and villany of it sickened me. This was the man who was to bear my father's name and fill my father's place. I determined at once to afford assistance to the wretched forsaken wife, and to wait and consider when and how it would be advisable to bring about the acknowledgment of the truth and her recognition. I thought of course only of simple justice. The circumstances of the marriage were too much against the girl to enable me to form any favourable opinion of her. I turned to the letter to find her name and address; they were not given: of course this was only an oversight; he must have intended to subjoin them. My perplexity was extreme. How was I to discover this unhappy woman? I knew too well the code of honour, as it is called, among men, to hope for help from any of his dissolute friends; they would keep his evil secret — as they believed it — faithfully.

"Algy Barford had brought me the letter, and on that occasion had referred to his being 'no end chums' with Lionel. But he had also declared that he knew nothing whatever of the contents of the letter. Still he might know something of her. I put a question or two to him, and found he did not. He had known a woman who lived with Lionel

for a short time, he believed, but she was dead. Clearly this was another person. Then I determined to have recourse to the professional finders-out of secrets, and I sent for Blackett. You have often seen him leaving me as you came in, or waiting for me as you went out. The day Mrs. Ludlow fainted, you remember, he was in the hall as you took her to the carriage, and he asked me so many questions about her, that I was quite amused at the idea of a detective being so enthusiastic. The materials he had to work on were sparing indeed, and the absence of all clue by name was very embarrassing. He went to work skilfully, I am sure, though he failed. He went to Tenby, and there he ascertained the name of the girl who had deserted her widowed mother for Leonard Brookfield. The mother had been many months dead. This was little help, for she had doubtless discarded the Christian name; and the personal description was probably coloured by the indignation her conduct had excited. Blackett learned that she was handsome, with red hair and blue eyes, — some said black. He could get no certain information on that point.

"But I need not linger over these details. No efforts were spared, yet our search proved vain. When some time had elapsed, their direction changed, and a woman and child were sought for: in every part of London where destitution hides, in all the abodes of flaunting sin, in hospitals, in refuges, in charitable institutions, — in vain. Sometimes Blackett suggested that she might have taken another protector and gone abroad; he made all possible in-

quiry. She had never communicated with her home, or with any one who had formerly known her. I began to despair of finding her; and I had almost made up my mind to relinquish the search, when Blackett came to me one day, in great excitement for him, and told me he was confident of finding her in a day or two at the farthest. 'And the child?' I asked. No, he knew nothing of the child; the woman he had traced, and whom he believed to be my brother's deserted wife, had no child, had never had one, within the knowledge of the people from whom he had got his information; nevertheless he felt sure he was right this time, and the child might have died before she came across them. She must have suffered terribly. Then he told me his information came through a pawnbroker, of whom he had frequent occasion to make inquiries. This man had shown him a gold locket, which had evidently held a miniature, on the inside of which was engraved 'From Leonard to Clara," and which had been pawned by a very poor but respectable person, whose address, in a miserable lane at Islington, he now gave to Blackett. He went to the place at once and questioned the woman, who was only too anxious to give all the information in her power in order to clear herself. She had received the locket in the presence of two persons, from a young woman who had lodged with her, and who had no other means of paying her. The young woman had gone away a week before, she did not know where; she had no money, and only a little bundle of clothes — a handkerchief full. She had no child, and had never said

any thing about one. The woman did not know her name. She had taken a picture out of the locket. She had red hair and dark eyes. This was all. I shall never forget the wretched feeling which came over me as I thought of the suffering this brief story implied, and of what the wretched woman might since have undergone. I remember so well, it was in January, — a dirty, wet, horrible day, — when Blackett told me all this; and I was haunted with the idea of the woman dying of cold and want in the dreadful streets. Blackett had no doubt of finding her now; she had evidently fallen to the veriest pauperism, and out of the lowest depths she would be drawn up, no doubt. So he set to work at once, but all in vain. Dead or living, no trace of her has ever been found; and the continuous search has been abandoned. Blackett only 'bears it in mind' now. Once he suggested to me, that as she was no doubt handsome, and not over particular, she might have got a living by sitting to the painters, and 'I'll try that lay,' he said; but nothing came of that either. I thought of it the day Annie and I met you first at the Private View, and if I had had the opportunity, would have asked you if you knew such a face as the one we were only guessing at, after all; but you were hurried, and the occasion passed; and when we met again, Blackett had exhausted all sources of information in that direction, and there was nothing to be learned.

"This is the story I had to tell you, Ludlow, and to leave to your discretion to use when the time comes. Within the last week Blackett has made

further attempts, and has again failed. Lionel is in London; but while I live he does not enter this house. I shall, after a little, when I am able, which I am not now, let him know that search has been unsuccessfully made for his wife, and demand that he shall furnish me with any clue in his possession, under the threat of immediate exposure. This, and every other plan, may be at any moment rendered impossible by my death; therefore I write this, and entreat you to continue the search until this woman be found, dead or living. So only can Annie's home be made happy and reputable for her when I shall have left it for ever. You will receive this from Annie's hands; a packet addressed to her will not be neglected or thrown aside; and if it becomes necessary for you to act for her, she will have the knowledge of the confidence I repose in you to support her in her acceptance of your interference and obedience to your advice. I confide her to you, my dear Ludlow — as I said before — as the dearest living thing in all the world to me. — Yours ever,

"CATERHAM."

CHAPTER V.

Dismay.

Mrs. Ludlow and Til had concluded the meal which is so generally advanced to a position of unnatural importance in a household devoid of the masculine element *en permanence;* and, the tea-things having been removed, the old lady, according to the established order, was provided with a book, over which she was expected to fall comfortably asleep. But she did not adhere to the rule of her harmless and placid life on this particular occasion. The "cross" was there — no doubt about it; and it was no longer indefinite in its nature, but very real, and beginning to be very heavy. Under the pressure of its weight Geoffrey's mother was growing indifferent to, even unobservant of, the small worries which had formerly occupied her mind, and furnished the subject-matter of her pardonable little querulousness and complaints — a grievance in no way connected with the tradespeople, and uninfluenced by the "greatest plagues in life" — which no reduction of duties involving cheap groceries, and no sumptuary laws restraining servant-gal-ism within limits of propriety in respect of curls and crinoline, had any power to assuage, — had taken possession of her now, and she fidgeted and fumed no longer, but was haunted by apprehension and sorely troubled.

A somewhat forced liveliness on Til's part, and a marked avoidance of the subject of Geoffrey, of whom, as he had just left them, it would have been natural that the mother and daughter should talk, bore witness to the embarrassment she felt, and increased Mrs. Ludlow's depression. She sat in her accustomed arm-chair, but her head drooped forward and her fingers tapped the arms in an absent manner, which showed her pre-occupation of mind. Til at length took her needle-work, and sat down opposite her mother, in a silence which was interrupted after a considerable interval by the arrival of Charley Potts, who had not altogether ceased to offer clumsy and violently-improbable explanations of his visits, though such were rapidly coming to be unnecessary.

On the present occasion Charley floundered through the preliminaries with more than his usual impulsive awkwardness, and there was that in his manner which caused Til (a quick observer, and especially so in his case) to divine that he had something particular to say to her. If she were right in her conjecture, it was clear that the opportunity must be waited for, — until the nap, in which Mrs. Ludlow invariably indulged in the evening, should have set in. The sooner the conversation settled into sequence, the sooner this desirable event might be expected to take place; so Til talked vigorously, and Charley seconded her efforts. Mrs. Ludlow said little, until, just as Charley began to think the nap was certainly coming, she asked him abruptly if he had seen Geoffrey lately. Miss Til happened to be

looking at Charley as the question was put to him, and saw in a moment that the matter he had come to speak to her about concerned her brother.

"No, ma'am," said Charley; "none of us have seen Geoff lately. Bowker and I have planned a state visit to him; he's as hard to get at as a swell in the Government — with things to give away — what do you call it? — patronage; but we're not going to stand it. We can't do without Geoff. By the by, how's the youngster, ma'am?"

"The child is very well, I believe," said Mrs. Ludlow, with a shake of the head, which Charley Potts had learned to recognise in connection with the "cross," but which he saw with regret on the present occasion. "Im afraid they've heard something," he thought. "But," continued the old lady querulously, "I see little of him, or of Geoffrey either. Things are changed; I suppose it's all right, but it's not easy for a mother to see it; and I don't think any mother would like to be a mere visitor at her own son's house, — not that I am even much of that now, Mr. Potts; for I'm sure it's a month or more since ever I have darkened the doors of Elm Lodge, and I shouldn't so much mind it, I hope, if it was for Geoffrey's good; but I can't think it's that —" Here the old lady's voice gave way, and she left off with a kind of sob, which went to Charley's soft heart and filled him with inexpressible confusion. Til was also much taken aback, though she saw at once that her mother had been glad of the opportunity of saying her little say, under the influence of the mortification she had felt at Geof-

frey's silence on the subject of her future visits to Elm Lodge. He had, as we have seen, made himself as delightful as possible in every other respect; but he had been strictly reticent about Margaret, and he had not invited his mother and sister to his house. She had been longing to say all this to Til; and now she had got it out, in the presence of a third party, who would "see fair" between her justifiable annoyance and Til's unreasonable defence of her brother. Til covered Charley's embarrassment by saying promptly, in a tone of extreme satisfaction,

"Geoffrey was here to-day; he paid us quite a long visit."

"Did he?" said Charley; "and is he all right?"

"O yes," said Til, "he is very well; and he told us all about his pictures; and, do you know, he's going to put baby and the nurse into a corner group, among the people on the Esplanade, — only he must wait till baby's back is stronger, and his neck leaves off waggling, so as to paint him properly, sitting up nice and straight in nurse's arms." And then Miss Til ran on with a great deal of desultory talk, concerning Geoffrey, and his description of the presents, and what he had said about Lord Caterham and Annie Maurice. Charley listened to her with more seriousness than he usually displayed; and Mrs. Ludlow sighed and shook her head at intervals, until, as the conversation settled into a dialogue, she gradually dropped asleep. Then Til's manner changed, and she lowered her voice, and asked Charley anxiously if he had come to tell her any bad news.

"If you have," she said, "and that it can be kept from mamma, tell it at once, and let me keep it from her."

With much true delicacy and deep sympathy, Charley then related to Til the scene which had taken place between himself, Bowker, and Stompff, — and told her that Bowker had talked the matter over with him, and they had agreed that it was not acting fairly by Geoffrey to allow him to remain in ignorance of the floating rumours, injurious to his wife's character, which were rife among their friends. How Stompff had heard of Margaret's having fainted in Lord Caterham's room, Charley could not tell; that he had heard it, and had heard a mysterious cause assigned to it, he knew. That he could have known any thing about an incident apparently so trivial proved that the talk had become tolerably general, and was tending to the injury of Geoffrey, not only in his self-respect and in his feelings, but in his prospects. Charley was much more alarmed and uneasy, and much more grieved for Geoffrey, than even Bowker; for he had reason to fear that no supposition derogatory to Margaret's antecedents could surpass the reality. He alone knew where and how the acquaintance between Geoffrey and Margaret had begun, and he was therefore prepared to estimate the calamity of such a marriage correctly. He did not exactly know what he had intended to say to Matilda Ludlow; he had come to the house with a vague idea that something ought to be done; — that Til ought to speak to her sister-in-law, — a notion which in itself proved Charley Potts to be any thing

but a wise man, — ought to point out to her that her indifference to her husband was at once ungrateful to him and short-sighted to her own interest; and that people, notably his employer, were talking about it. Charley Potts was not exactly an adept in reading character, and the real Margaret was a being such as he could neither have understood nor believed in; therefore the crudity, wildness, and inapplicability of this scheme were to be excused.

A very few words on his part served to open the susceptible heart of Miss Til, especially as they had spoken on the subject, though generally, before; and they were soon deep in the exchange of mutual confidences. Til cried quietly, so as not to wake her mother; and it distressed Charley very keenly to see her tears and to hear her declare that her sister-in-law had not the slightest regard for her opinion; that, though perfectly civil to her, Margaret had met all her attempts at sisterly intimacy with most forbidding coldness; and that she felt sure any attempt to put their relation on a more familiar footing would be useless.

"She must have been very badly brought up, I am sure," said Til. "We don't know any thing about her family; but I am sure she never learned what the duties of a wife and mother are."

Charley looked admiringly at Til as she sadly uttered this remark, and his mind was divided between a vision of Til realising in the most perfect manner the highest ideal of conjugal and maternal duty, and speculating upon what might have been the polite fiction presented by Geoffrey to his mother

and sister as an authentic history of Margaret's parentage and antecedents.

"Did Geoffrey seem cheerful and happy to-day?" he asked, escaping off the dangerous ground of questions which he could have answered only too completely.

"Well," replied Til, "I can't say he did. He talked and laughed, and all that; but I could see that he was uneasy and unhappy. How much happier he was when we were all together, in the days which seem so far off now!"

At this point the conversation became decidedly sentimental; for Charley, while carefully maintaining that true happiness was only to be found in the married state, was equally careful to state his opinion that separation from Til must involve a perfectly incomparable condition of misery; and altogether matters were evidently reaching a climax. Matilda Ludlow was an unaffected honest girl: she knew perfectly well that Charley loved her, and she had no particular objection to his selecting this particular occasion on which to tell her so. But Til and Charley were not to part that evening in the character of affianced lovers; for, in one of those significant pauses which precede important words, cab-wheels rolled rapidly up to the little gate, hurried footsteps ran along the flagged path, and a loud knock and ring at the door impatiently demanded attention.

Mrs. Ludlow awoke with a violent start; Charley and Til looked at each other. The door was opened, and a moment later the cook from Elm Lodge was

in the room, and had replied to Charley's hurried question by the statement that her master was very ill, and she had been sent to fetch Miss Ludlow.

"Very ill! has any accident happened?" they all questioned the woman, who showed much feeling — all his dependents loved Geoffrey — and the confusion was so great, that it was some minutes before they succeeded in learning what actually had happened. That Geoffrey had returned home as usual; had gone to the nursery, and played with the child and talked to the nurse as usual; had gone to his painting-room; and had not again been seen by the servants, until the housemaid had found him lying on the hearth-rug an hour before, when they had sent for Dr. Brandram, and that gentleman had despatched the cook to bring Miss Ludlow.

"Did Mrs. Ludlow tell you to come?" asked Til.

To this question the woman replied that her mistress was not at home. She had been out the greater part of the day, had returned home some time later than Mr. Ludlow, and had kept the cab waiting for an hour; then she had gone away again, and had not returned when the cook had been sent on her errand. Charley Potts exchanged looks of undisguised alarm with Til at this portion of the woman's narrative, and, seeing that reserve would now be wholly misplaced, he questioned her closely concerning Mrs. Ludlow. She had nothing to tell, however, beyond that the housemaid had said her master and mistress had been together in the dining-room, and, surprised that dinner had not been ordered up, she

had gone thither; but hearing her mistress speaking "rather strangely," she had not knocked at the door. The servants had wondered at the delay, she said, not understanding why their master should go without his dinner because Mrs. Ludlow was not at home, and had at length found him as she described.

"Did Mrs. Ludlow often go out in this way?" asked Mr. Potts.

"No, sir, never," said the woman. "I never knew my mistress leave my master alone before, sir; and I am afraid something has took place between them."

The distress and bewilderment of the little party were extreme. Manifestly there was but one thing to be done; Til must obey the doctor's summons, and repair immediately to her brother's house. He was very ill indeed, the cook said, and quite "off his head;" he did not talk much, but what he did say was all nonsense; and Dr. Brandram had said it was the beginning of brain-fever. Charley and Til were both surprised at the firmness and collectedness manifested by Mrs. Ludlow under this unexpected trial. She was very pale and she trembled very much, but she was quite calm and quiet when she told Til that she must put up such articles of clothing as she would require for a few days, as it was her intention to go to her son and to remain with him.

"I am the fittest person, my dear," said the old lady. "If it be only illness that ails him, I know more about it than you do; if it is sorrow also, and sorrow of the kind I suspect, I am fitter to hear it and act in it than you."

It was finally agreed that they should both go to Geoffrey's house, and that Til should return home in the morning; for even in this crisis Mrs. Ludlow could not quite forget her household gods, and to contemplate them bereft at once of her own care and that of Til would have been too grievous; so they started — the three women in the cab, and Charley Potts on the box, very silent, very gloomy, and not even in his inmost thoughts approaching the subject of a pipe.

It was past ten when Geoffrey Ludlow's mother and sister reached the house which had seen such terrible events since they had visited it last. Already the dreary neglected air which settles over every room in a dwelling invaded by serious illness, except the one which is the scene of suffering, had come upon it. Four hours earlier all was bright and cheerful, well cared for and orderly; now, though the disarray was not material, it was most expressive. Mrs. Geoffrey Ludlow had not returned; the doctor had gone away, but was coming back as soon as possible, having left one of the servants by Geoffrey's bedside, with orders to apply wet linen to his temples without intermission. Geoffrey was quiet now — almost insensible, they thought. Mrs. Ludlow and Til went to the sick-room at once, and Charley Potts turned disconsolately into the dining-room, where the cloth was still laid, and the chairs stood about in disorder — one, which Geoffrey had knocked down, lay unheeded on the ground. Charley picked it up, sat down upon it, and leaned his elbows disconsolately on the table.

"It's all up, I'm afraid," said he to himself; "and she's off with the other fellow, whoever he is. Well, well, it will either kill Geoff outright or break his heart for the rest of his life. At all events, there couldn't have been much good in her if she didn't like Til."

After some time Dr. Brandram arrived, and Charley heard him ask the servant whether Mrs. Ludlow had returned, and heard her reply that her mistress was still absent, but Mrs. Ludlow and her daughter had come, and were in her master's room. The doctor went upstairs immediately, and Charley still waited in the parlour, determined to waylay him as he came down.

Geoffrey was dangerously ill, there was no doubt of that, though his mother's terror magnified danger into hopelessness, and refused to be comforted by Dr. Brandram's assurance that no living man could tell for certain how things would be. She met the doctor's inquiry about Margaret with quiet reserve: she did not expect her daughter-in-law's return that evening, she said; but she and Miss Ludlow were prepared to remain. It was very essential that they should do so, Dr. Brandram assured her; and on the following day he would procure a professional nurse. Then he made a final examination of his patient, gave the ladies their instructions, observed with satisfaction the absence of fuss, and the quiet self-subduing alacrity of Til, and went downstairs, shaking his head and wondering, to be pounced upon in the little hall by the impulsive Charley, who drew him into the dining-room, and poured out a torrent of

questions. Dr. Brandram was disposed to be a little reserved at first, but unbent when Charley assured him that he and Geoffrey were the most intimate friends — "Brothers almost," said Mr. Potts in a conscious tone, which did not strike the doctor. Then he told his anxious interlocutor that Geoffrey was suffering from brain-fever, which he supposed to be the result of a violent shock, but of what kind he could form no idea; and then he said something, in a hesitating sort of way, about "domestic affairs."

"It is altogether on the mind, then," said Charley. "In that case, no one can explain any thing but himself."

"Precisely so," said Dr. Brandram; "and it may, it most probably will, be a considerable time before he will be able to give us any explanation of any thing, and before it would be safe to ask him for any. In the mean time, — but no doubt Mrs. Ludlow will return, and —"

"I don't think she will do any thing of the kind," said Charley Potts in a decisive tone; "and, in fact, doctor, I think it would be well to say as little as possible about her."

Dr. Brandram looked at Mr. Potts with an expression intended to be knowing, but which was in reality only puzzled, and assuring him of his inviolable discretion, departed. Charley remained at Elm Lodge until after midnight, and then, finding that he could be of no service to the watchers, sorrrowfully wended his way back to town on foot.

Wearily dragged on the days in the sick man's room, where he lay racked and tormented by fever,

and vaguely oppressed in mind. His mother and sister tended him with unwearied assiduity, and Dr. Brandram called in further medical advice. Geoffrey's life hung in the balance for many days — days during which the terror his mother and Til experienced are not to be told. The desolate air of the house deepened; the sitting-rooms were quite deserted now. All the bright pretty furniture which Geoff had bought for the delectation of his bride, all the little articles of use and ornament peculiarly associated with Margaret, were dust-covered, and had a ghostly seeming. Charley Potts — who passed a great deal of his time moping about Elm Lodge, too thankful to be permitted on the premises, and occasionally to catch a glimpse of Til's figure, as she glided noiselessly from the sick-room to the lower regions in search of some of the innumerable things which are always being wanted in illness and are never near at hand — occasionally strolled into the painting-room, and lifting the cover which had been thrown over it, looked sadly at "The Esplanade at Brighton," and wondered whether dear old Geoff would ever paint baby's portrait among that group in the left-hand corner.

The only member of the household who pursued his usual course of existence was this same baby. Unconscious alike of the flight of his mother and the illness, nigh unto death, of his father, the child throve apace, and sometimes the sound of his cooing, crowing voice, coming through the open doors into the room where his grandmother sat and looked into the wan haunted face of her son, caused her un-

speakable pangs of sorrow and compassion. The child "took to" Til wonderfully, and it is impossible to tell the admiration with which the soul of Charley Potts was filled, as he saw the motherly ways of the young lady towards the little fellow, happily unconscious that he did not possess a mother's love.

Of Margaret nothing was heard. Mrs. Ludlow and Til were utterly confounded by the mystery which surrounded them. She made no sign from the time she left the house. Their ignorance of the circumstances of her departure was so complete, that they could not tell whether to expect her to do so or not. Her dresses and ornaments were all undisturbed in the drawers in the room where poor Geoffrey lay, and they did not know whether to remove them or not. She had said to Geoffrey, "Whatever I actually require I will send for;" but they did not know this, and she never had sent. The centre of the little system — the chief person in the household — the idolised wife — she had disappeared as utterly as if her existence had been only a dream. The only person who could throw any light on the mystery was, perhaps, dying — at all events, incapable of recollection, thought, or speech. It "got about" in the neighbourhood that Mr. Ludlow was dangerously ill, and that his mother and sister were with him, but his beautiful wife was not; whereat the neighbourhood, feeling profoundly puzzled, merely looked unutterably wise, and had always thought there was something odd in that quarter. Then the neighbourhood called to inquire and to condole, and was very pointed in its hopes that Mrs. Geoffrey

Ludlow was "bearing up well," and very much astonished to receive for answer, "Thank you, ma'am; but missis is not at home." Mrs. Ludlow knew nothing of all this, and Til, who did know, cared nothing; but it annoyed Charley Potts, who heard and saw a good deal from his post of vantage in the dining-room window, and who relieved his feelings by swearing under his breath, and making depreciatory comments upon the personal appearance of the ladies as they approached the house, with their faces duly arranged to the sympathetic pattern.

It chanced that, on one occasion, when Geoffrey had been about ten days ill, Til came down to the dining-room to speak to the faithful Charley, carrying the baby on one arm, and in her other hand a bundle of letters. Charley took the child from her as a matter of course; and the youthful autocrat graciously sanctioning the arrangement, the two began to talk eagerly of Geoffrey. Til was looking very pale and weary, and Charley was much moved by her appearance.

"I tell you what it is," he said, "you'll kill yourself, whether Geoffrey lives or dies." He spoke in a tone suggestive of feeling himself personally injured, and Til was not too far gone to blush and smile faintly as she perceived it.

"O no, I sha'n't," she said. "I'm going to lie down all this afternoon in the night-nursery. Mamma is asleep now, and Geoffrey is quite quiet, though the nurse says she sees no change for the better, no real change of any kind indeed. And so I came down to ask you what you think I had better do

about these letters." She laid them on the table as she spoke. "I don't think they are business letters, because you have taken care to let all Geoffrey's professional friends know, haven't you, Charley?"

Charley thrilled; she had dropped unconsciously, in the intimacy of a common sorrow, into calling him by his Christian name, but the pleasure it gave him had by no means worn off yet.

"Yes," he said; "and you have no notion what a state they are all in about dear old Geoff. I assure you they all envy me immensely, because I can be of some little use to you. They don't come here, you know, because that would be no use — only making a row with the door-bell, and taking up the servants' time; but every day they come down to my place, or write me notes, or scribble their names on the door, with fat notes of interrogation after them, if I'm not at home. That means, 'How's dear old Geoff? send word at once.' Why, there's Stompff — I told you he was a beast, didn't I? Well, he's not half a beast, I assure you; he is in such a way about Geoff; and, upon my word, I don't think it's all because he is worth no end of money to him, — I don't indeed. He is mercenary, of course, but not always and not altogether; and he really quite got over me yesterday by the way he talked of Geoffrey, and wanted to know if there was any thing in the world he could do. Any thing in the world, according to Stompff, meant any thing in the way of money, I suppose; an advance upon the 'Esplanade,' or something of that sort."

"Yes, I suppose it did," said Til; "but we don't

want money. Mamma has plenty to go on with until —" here her lip quivered, — "until Geoffrey can understand and explain things. It's very kind of Mr. Stompff, however, and I'm glad he's not quite a beast," said the young lady simply. "But, Charley, about these letters; what should I do?"

At this point the baby objected to be any longer unnoticed, and was transferred to Til, who walked up and down the room with the injured innocent, while Charley turned over the letters, and looked at their superscriptions.

"You are sure there is no letter from his wife among these?" said Charley.

"O no!" replied Til; "I know Margaret's hand well; and I have examined all the letters carefully every day. There has never been one from her."

"Here are two with the same monogram, and the West-end district mark; I think they must be from Miss Maurice. If these letters can be made out to mean any thing, they are A.M. And see, one is plain, and one has a deep black edge."

Til hurried up to the table. "I hope Lord Caterham is not dead," she said; "I have heard Geoffrey speak of him with great regard; and only the day he was taken ill, he said he feared the poor fellow was going fast."

"I think we had better break the seal and see," said Charley; "Geoff would not like any neglect in that quarter."

He broke the seal as he spoke, and read the melancholy note which Annie had written to Geoffrey

when Arthur died, and which had never received an answer.

Charley Potts and Til were much shocked and affected at the intelligence which the note contained.

"I haven't cared about the papers since Geoff has been ill, or I suppose I should have seen the announcement of Lord Caterham's death, though I don't particularly care for reading about the swells at any time," said Charley. "But how nicely she writes to Geoffrey, poor girl! I am sure she will be shocked to hear of his illness, and you must write to her, — h'm, — Til. What do you say to writing, and letting me take your letter to-morrow myself? Then she can ask me any questions she likes, and you need not enter into any painful explanations."

Til was eminently grateful for this suggestion, which she knew was dictated by the sincerest and most disinterested wish to spare her; for to Charley the idea of approaching the grandeur of St. Barnabas Square, and the powdered pomposity of the lordly flunkeys, was, as she well knew, wholly detestable. So it was arranged that Charley should fulfil this mission early on the following day, before he presented himself at Elm Lodge. The baby was sent upstairs, Til wrote her note, and Charley departed very reluctantly, stipulating that Til should at once fulfil her promise of lying down in the nursery.

When, on the ensuing morning, Miss Maurice's maid reached Elm Lodge, the servants communicated to her the startling intelligence, which she roused Annie from her sleep to impart to her, without any reference to Mrs. Ludlow and Til, who were not

aware for some time that Miss Maurice had sent to make inquiries. On his arrival at St. Barnabas Square, Charley Potts was immediately admitted to Annie's presence, and the result of the interview was that she arrived at Elm Lodge escorted by that gentleman, whose embarrassment under the distinguished circumstances was extreme, before noon. She knew from Charley's report that it would be quite in vain to take Caterham's letter with her; that it must be long ere it should meet the eyes for which it was written, if ever it were to do so, and it remained still undisturbed in her charge. So Annie Maurice shared the sorrow and the fear of Geoffrey's mother and sister, and discussed the mystery that surrounded the calamities which had befallen them, perfectly unconscious that within reach of her own hand lay the key to the enigma.

CHAPTER VI.

A Clue.

WRITTEN by a dying hand, the letter addressed by Lord Caterham to Geoffrey Ludlow was read when the doctors would scarcely have pronounced its recipient out of the jaws of death. Gaunt, wan, hectic; with great bistre-rings round his big eyes, now more prominent than ever; with his shapely white hands now almost transparent in their thinness; with his bushy beard dashed here and there with gray patches; and with O such a sense of weariness and weakness, — old Geoff, stretched supine on his bed, demanded news of Margaret. They had none to give him: told him so — at first gently, then reiterated it plainly; but he would not believe it. They must know something of her movements; some one must have been there to tell him where she was; something must have been heard of her. To all these questions negative answers. Then, as his brain cleared and his strength increased — for, except under both of these conditions, such a question would not have occurred to him — he asked whether, during his illness, there had been any communication from Lord Beauport's house. A mystery then — a desire to leave it over, until Miss Maurice's next call, which happened the next day, when Caterham's letter, intact, was handed to him.

That letter lay on a chair by Geoffrey's bedside the whole of that afternoon. To clutch it, to look at it, to hold it, with its seal yet unbroken, before his eyes, he had employed such relics of strength as remained to him; but he dared not open it. He felt that he could give no explanation of his feelings; but he felt that if he broke that seal, and read what was contained in that letter, all his recent tortures would return with tenfold virulence: the mocking demons that had sat on his bed and sneered at him; the fiery serpents that had uncoiled themselves between him and the easel on which stood the picture which urgent necessity compelled him to work at; the pale fair form, misty and uncertain generally, yet sometimes with Margaret's hair and eyes, that so constantly floated across his vision, and as constantly eluded his outstretched arms, — all these phantasms of his fevered brain would return again. And yet, in it, in that sheet of paper lying so temptingly near to his pillow, there was news of her! He had but to stretch out his hand, and he should learn how far, at least, her story was known to the relatives of him who —— The thought in itself was too much; and Geoffrey swooned off. When he recovered, his first thought was of the letter; his first look to assure himself that it had not been removed. No, there it lay! He could resist the temptation no longer; and, raising himself on his elbow, he opened and read it.

The effect of the perusal of that letter on Geoffrey Ludlow none knew but himself. The doctors found him "not quite so well" for the succeeding day or

two, and thought that his "tone" was scarcely so good as they had been led to anticipate; certain it was that he made no effort to rouse himself, and that, save occasionally when spoken to by Til, he remained silent and preoccupied. On the third day he asked Til to write to Bowker, and beg him to come to him at once. Within twenty-four hours that worthy presented himself at Elm Lodge.

After a few words with Til downstairs, Mr. Bowker was shown up to Geoffrey's room, the door of which Til opened, and, when Mr. Bowker had entered, shut it behind him. The noise of the closing door roused Geoffrey, and he turned in his bed, and, looking up, revealed such a worn and haggard face, that old Bowker stopped involuntarily, and drew a long breath, as he gazed on the miserable appearance of his friend. There must have been something comical in the rueful expression of Bowker's face, for old Geoff smiled feebly, as he said,

"Come in, William; come in, old friend! I've had a hard bout of it, old fellow, since you saw me; but there's no danger now — no infection, I mean, or any thing of that kind."

Geoff spoke haphazard; but what he had said was the best thing to restore Mr. Bowker to himself.

"Your William's fever-proof," he growled out in reply, "and don't fear any nonsense of that kind; and if he did, it's not that would keep him away from a friend's bedside. I should have been here — that is, if you'd have let me; and, oddly enough, though I'm such a rough old brute in general, I'm handy and quiet in times of sickness, — at least so

I've been told;" and here Bowker stifled a great sigh. "But the first I heard of your illness was from your sister's letter, which I only got this morning."

"Give me your hand, William; I know that fast enough. But I didn't need any additional nursing. Til and the old lady — God bless them! — have pulled me through splendidly, and — But I'm beyond nursing now, William; what I want is —" and Geoff's voice failed him, and he stopped.

Old Bowker eyed him with tear-blurred vision for a moment, and then said, "What you want is —"

"Don't mind me just now, William; I'm horribly weak, and girlish, and trembling, but I shall get to it in time. What I want is, some man, some friend, to whom I can talk openly and unreservedly, — whose advice and aid I can seek, in such wretchedness as, I trust, but few have experienced."

It was a good thing that Geoffrey's strength had in some degree returned, for Bowker clutched his hand in an iron grip, as in a dull low voice he said, "Do you remember my telling you the story of my life? Why did I tell you that? Not for sympathy, but for example. I saw the rock on to which you were drifting, and hoped to keep you clear. I exposed the sadness of my life to you when the game was played out and there was no possibility of redemption. I can't tell what strait you may be in; but if I can help you out of it, there is no mortal thing I will not do to aid you."

As well as he could Geoff returned the pressure;

then, after a moment's pause, said, "You know, of course, that my wife has left me?"

Bowker bowed in acquiescence.

"You know the circumstances?"

"I know nothing, Geoff, beyond the mere fact. Whatever talk there may be among such of the boys as I drop in upon now and then, if it turned upon you and your affairs, save in the matter of praising your art, it would be certain to be hushed as soon as I stepped in amongst them. They knew our intimacy, and they are by far too good fellows to say any thing that would pain me. So that beyond the mere fact which yon have just stated, I know nothing."

Then in a low weak voice, occasionally growing full and powerful under excitement, and subsiding again into its faint tones, Geoffrey Ludlow told to William Bowker the whole history of his married life, beginning with his finding Margaret on the door-step, and ending by placing in his friend's hands the posthumous letter of Lord Caterham. Throughout old Bowker listened with rapt attention to the story, and when he came back from the window, to which he had stepped for the perusal of the letter, Geoffrey noticed that there were big tears rolling down his cheeks. He was silent for a minute or two after he had laid the letter on Geoffrey's bed; when he spoke he said, "We're a dull lot, the whole race of us; and that's the truth. We pore over our own twopenny sorrows, and think that the whole army of martyrs could not show such a specimen as ourselves. Why, Geoff, dear old man,

what was my punishment to yours! What was — but, however, I need not talk of that. You want my services — say how."

"I want your advice first, William. I want to know how to — how to find my wife — for, O, to me she is my wife; how to find Margaret. You'll blame me probably, and tell me that I am mad — that I ought to cast her off altogether, and to — But I cannot do that, William; I cannot do that; for I love her — O my God, how I love her still!" And Geoffrey Ludlow hid his face in his arms, and wept like a child.

"I sha'n't blame you, Geoff, nor tell you any thing of the kind," said old Bowker, in a deep low voice. "I should have been very much surprised if — However, that's neither here nor there. What we want is to find her now. You say there's not been the slightest clue to her since she left this house?"

"Not the slightest."

"She has not sent for any thing — clothes, or any thing?"

"For nothing, as I understand."

"She has not sent, — you see, one must understand these things, Geoff; all our actions will be guided by them, — she has not sent to ask about the child?"

Geoff shuddered for an instant, then said, "She has not."

"That simplifies our plans," said Bowker. "It is plain now that we have only one chance of discovering her whereabouts."

"And that is —"

"Through Blackett the detective, the man mentioned in Lord Caterham's letter. He must be a sharp fellow; for through the sheer pursuance of his trade, and without the smallest help, he must have been close upon her trail, even up to the night when you met her and withdrew her from the range of his search. If he could learn so much unaided, he will doubtless be able to strike again upon her track with the information we can give him."

"There's no chance of this man — this Captain Brakespere, having — I mean — now he's back, you know — having taken means to hide her somewhere — where — one couldn't find her, you know?" said Geoffrey, hesitatingly.

"If your William knows any thing of the world," replied Bowker, "there's no chance of Captain Thingummy having taken the least trouble about her. However, I'll go down to Scotland Yard and see what is to be made of our friend Inspector Blackett. God bless you, old boy! You know if she is to be found, I'll do it."

They are accustomed to odd visitors in Scotland Yard; but the police-constables congregated in the little stone hall stared the next day when Mr. Bowker pushed open the swing-door, and calmly planting himself among them, ejaculated "Blackett." Looking at his beard, his singular garb, and listening to his deep voice, the sergeant to whom he was referred at first thought he was a member of some foreign branch of the force; then glancing at the general

wildness of his demeanour, had a notion that he was one of the self-accused criminals who are so constantly forcing themselves into the grasp of justice, and who are so impatient of release; and finally, comprehending what he wanted, sent him, under convoy of a constable, through various long corridors, into a cocoa-nut-matted room, furnished with a long green-baize-covered table, on which were spread a few sheets of blotting-paper, and a leaden inkstand, and the walls of which were adorned with a printed tablet detailing the disposition of the various divisions of the police-force, and the situation of the fire-escapes in the metropolis, and a fly-blown Stationers' Almanac. Left to himself, Mr. Bowker had scarcely taken stock of these various articles, when the door opened, and Mr. Inspector Blackett, edging his portly person through the very small aperture which he had allowed himself for ingress, entered the room, and closed the door stealthily behind him.

"Servant, sir," said he, with a respectful bow, and a glance at Bowker, which took in the baldness of his head, the thickness of his beard, the slovenliness of his apparel, and the very shape of his boots, — "servant, sir. You asked for me?"

"I did, Mr. Blackett. I've come to ask your advice and assistance in a rather delicate matter, in which you've already been engaged — Lord Caterham's inquiry."

"O, beg pardon, sir. Quite right. Friend of his lordship's, may I ask, sir?"

"Lord Caterham is dead, Mr. —"

"Quite right, sir; all right, sir. Right to be cautious in these matters; don't know who you are, sir. If you had not known that fact, must have ordered you out, sir. Impostor, of course. All on the square, Mr. — beg pardon; didn't mention your name, sir."

"My name is Bowker. To a friend of mine, too ill now to follow the matter himself, Lord Caterham on his deathbed wrote a letter, detailing the circumstances under which he had employed you in tracing a young woman. That friend has himself been very ill, or he would have pursued this matter sooner. He now sends me to ask whether you have any news?"

"Beg pardon, sir; can't be too cautious in this matter. What may be the name of that friend?"

"Ludlow — Mr. Geoffrey Ludlow."

"Right you are, sir! Kow the name well; have seen Mr. Ludlow at his lordship's; a pleasant gentleman too, sir, though not giving me the idea of one to take much interest in such a business as this. However, I see we're all square on that point, sir; and I'll report to you as exactly as I would to my lord, if he'd been alive, — feeling, of course, that a gentleman's a gentleman, and that an officer's trouble will be remunerated —"

"You need not doubt that, Mr. Blackett."

"I don't doubt it, sir; more especially when you hear what I've got to tell. It's been a wearing business, Mr. Bowker, and that I don't deny; there have been many cases which I have tumbled-to quicker, and have been able to lay my fingers upon parties quicker; but this has been a long chase; and though

other members of the force has chaffed me, as it were, wanting to know when I shall be free for any thing else, and that sort of thing, there's been that excitement in it that I've never regretted the time bestowed, and felt sure I should hit it at last. My ideas has not been wrong in that partic'ler, Mr. Bowker; I *have* hit it at last!"

"The devil you have!"

"I have indeed, sir; and hit it, as has cur'ously happened in my best cases, by a fluke. It was by the merest fluke that I was at Radley's Hotel in Southampton and nobbled Mr. Sampson Hepworth, the absconding banker of Lombard Street, after Daniel Forester and all the city-men had been after him for six weeks. It was all a fluke that I was eatin' a Bath-bun at Swindon when the clerk that did them Post-office robberies tried to pass one of the notes to the refreshment gal. It was all a fluke that I was turning out of Grafton Street, after a chat with the porter of the Westminster Club, — which is an old officer of the G's and a pal of mine, — into Bond Street, when I saw a lady that I'd swear to, if description's any use, though I never see her before, comin' out of Long's Hotel."

"A lady! — Long's Hotel!"

"A lady a-comin' out of Long's Hotel. A lady with — not to put too fine a point upon it — red hair and fine eyes and a good figure; the very moral of the description I got at Tenby and them other places. I twigged all this before she got her veil

down; and I said to myself, 'Blackett, that's your bird for a hundred pound.'"

"And were you right? Was it —"

"Wait a minute, sir: let's take the things in the order in which they naturally present themselves. She hailed a cab and jumped in, all of a tremble like, as I could see. I hailed another — hansom mine was; and I give the driver the office, which he tumbled-to at once — most of the West-enders knows me; and we follows the other until he turned up a little street in Nottin' 'Ill, and I, marking where she got out, stopped at the end of it. When she'd got inside, I walked up and took stock of the house, which was a little milliner's and stay-shop. It was cur'ous, was'nt it, sir," said Mr. Blackett, with a grave professional smile, "that my good lady should want a little job in the millinery line done for her just then, and that she should look round into that very shop that evening, and get friendly with the missis, which was a communicative kind of woman, and should pay her a trifle in advance, and should get altogether so thick as to be asked in to take a cup of tea in the back-parlour, and get a-talking about the lodger? Once in, I'll back my old lady against any ferret that was ever showed at Jemmy Welsh's. She hadn't had one cup of tea before she know'd all about the lodger; how she was the real lady, but dull and lonesome like; how she'd sit cryin' and mopin' all day; how she'd no visitors and no letters, and how her name was Lambert, and her linen all marked M. L. She'd only been there a day or two then, and as she'd

scarcely any luggage, the milliner was doubtful about her money. My good lady came back that night, and told me all this, and I was certain our bird was caged. So I put one of our men regular to sweep a crossin' during the daytime, and I communicated with the sergeant of the division to keep the house looked after at night. But, Lor' bless you, she's no intention of goin' away. Couldn't manage it, I think, if she had; for my missis, who's been up several times since, says the milliner says her lodger's in a queer way, she thinks."

"How do you mean in a queer way?" interrupted Bowker; "ill?"

"Well, not exactly ill, I think, sir. I can't say exactly how, for the milliner's rather a stupid woman; and it wouldn't do for my missis — though she'd find it out in a minute — to see the lady. As far as I can make out, it's a kind of fits, and she seems to have had 'em pretty bad — off her head for hours at a time, you know. It's rather cornered me, that has, as I don't exactly know how to act in the case; and I went round to the Square to tell his lordship, and then found out what had happened. I was thinking of askin' to see the Hearl —"

"The what, Mr. Blackett?"

"The Hearl — Hearl Beauport, his lordship's father. But now you've come, sir, you'll know what to do, and what orders to give me."

"Yes, quite right," said Bowker, after a moment's consideration. "You must not see Lord Beauport; he's in a sad state of mind still, and any

further worry might be dangerous. You've done admirably, Mr. Blackett, — admirably indeed; and your reward shall be proportionate, you may take my word for that; but I think it will be best to leave matters as they are until — at all events, until I have spoken to my friend. The name was Lambert, I think you said; and what was the address?"

"No. 102 Thomson Street, just beyond Nottin'-'Ill Gate; milliner's shop, name of Chapman. Beg your pardon, sir, but this is a pretty case, and one as has been neatly worked up; you won't let it be spoilt by any amatoors?"

"Eh? by what? I don't think I understand you."

"You won't let any one go makin' inquiries on their own hook? So many of our best cases is spoilt by amatoors shovin' their oars in."

"You may depend on that, Mr. Blackett; the whole credit of the discovery is justly due to you, and you shall have it. Now good day to you; I shall find you here, I suppose, when next I want you?"

Mr. Blackett bowed, and conducted his visitor through the hollow-sounding corridors, and bade him a respectful farewell at the door. Then, when William Bowker was alone, he stopped, and shook his head sorrowfully, muttering, "A bad job, a bad job! God help you, Geoff, my poor fellow! there's more trouble in store for you — more trouble in store!"

CHAPTER VII.

Tracked.

The news which Mr. William Bowker had heard from Inspector Blackett troubled its recipient considerably, and it was not until he had thought it over deeply and consumed a large quantity of tobacco in the process, that he arrived at any settled determination as to what was the right course to be pursued by him. His first idea was to make Geoffrey Ludlow acquainted with the whole story, and let him act as he thought best; but a little subsequent reflection changed his opinion on this point. Geoff was very weak in health, certainly in no fit state to leave his bed; and yet if he heard that Margaret was found, that her address was known, above all that she was ill, Bowker knew him well enough to be aware that nothing would prevent him at once setting out to see her, and probably to use every effort to induce her to return with him. Such a course would be bad in every way, but in the last respect it would be fatal. For one certain reason Bowker had almost hoped that nothing more might ever be heard of the wretched woman who had fallen like a curse upon his friend's life. He knew Geoffrey Ludlow root and branch, knew how thoroughly weak he was, and felt certain that, no matter how grievous the injury which Mar-

garet had done him, he had but to see her again — to see her more especially in sickness and misfortune — to take her back to his heart and to his hearth, and defy the counsel of his friends and the opinion of the world. That would never do. Geoff had been sufficiently dragged down by this unfortunate infatuation; but he had a future which should be independent of her, undimmed by any tarnish accruing to him from those wondrous misspent days. So old Bowker firmly believed; and to accomplish that end he determined that none of Inspector Blackett's news should find its way to Geoffrey's ears, at all events until he, Bowker, had personally made himself acquainted with the state of affairs.

It must have been an impulse of the strongest friendship and love for Geoff that induced William Bowker to undertake this duty; for it was one which inspired him with aversion, not to say horror. At first he had some thoughts of asking Charley Potts to do it; but then he bethought him that Charley, headstrong, earnest, and impulsive as he was, was scarcely the man to be intrusted with such a delicate mission. And he remembered, moreover, that Charley was now to a great extent *lié* with Geoff's family, that he had been present at Geoff's first meeting with Margaret, that he had always spoken against her, and that now, imbued as he was likely to be with some of the strong feelings of old Mrs. Ludlow, he would be certain to make a mess of the mission, and, without the least intention of being offensive, would hurt some one's feelings in an unmistakable and unpardonable manner. No; he must go himself, hor-

ribly painful as it would be to him. His had been a set gray life for who should say how many years; he had not been mixed up with any woman's follies or griefs in ever so slight a degree, he had heard no woman's voice in plaintive appeal or earnest confession, he had seen no woman's tears or hung upon no woman's smile, since — since when? Since the days spent with *her*. Ah, how the remembrance shut out the present and opened up the long, long vistas of the past! He was no longer the bald-headed, grizzle-bearded, stout elderly man; he was young Bowker, from whom so much was expected; and the common tavern-parlour in which he was seated, with its beer-stained tables and its tobacco-reek, faded away, and the long dusty roads of Andalusia, the tinkling bells of the mules, the cheery shouts of the sunburnt *arrieros*, the hard-earned pull at the *bota*, and the loved presence, now vanished for ever, rose in his memory.

When his musings were put to flight by the entrance of the waiter, he paid his score, and summoning up his resolution he went out into the noisy street, and mounting the first omnibus was borne away to his destination. He found the place indicated to him by Blackett — a small but clean and decent street — and soon arrived at Mrs. Chapman's house. There, at the door, he stopped, undecided what to do. He had not thought of any excuse for demanding an interview with Mrs. Chapman's lodger, and, on turning the subject over in his mind, he could not imagine any at all likely to be readily received. See Margaret he must; and to do that, he thought he must take her unprepared and on a sud-

den; if he sent up his name, he would certainly be refused admittance. His personal appearance was far too Bohemian in its character to enable him to pass himself off as her lawyer, or any friend of her family; his only hope was to put a bold front on it, to mention her name, and to walk straight on to her room, leaving it to chance to favour his efforts.

He entered the shop — a dull dismal little place, with a pair of stays lying helplessly in the window, and a staring black-eyed torso of a female doll, for cap-making purposes, insanely smiling on the counter. Such a heavy footfall as Mr. Bowker's was seldom heard in those vestal halls; such a grizzly-bearded face as Mr. Bowker's was seldom seen in such close proximity to the cap-making dummy; and little Mrs. Chapman the milliner came out "all in a tremble," as she afterwards expressed it, from her inner sanctum, which was about as big and as tepid as a warm-bath, and in a quavering voice demanded the intruder's business. She was a mild-eyed, flaxen-haired, quiet, frightened little woman, and old Bowker's heart softened towards her, as he said, "You have a friend of mine lodging with you, ma'am, I think — Mrs. Lambert?"

"O, dear; then, if you're a friend of Mrs. Lambert's, you're welcome here, I can assure you, sir!" and the little woman looked more frightened than ever, and held up her hands half in fear, half in relief.

"Ah, she's been ill, I hear," said Bowker, wishing to have it understood that he was thoroughly *en rapport* with the lodger.

"Ill! — I'm thankful you've come, sir! — no one, unless they saw her, would credit how ill she is — I mean to be up and about, and all that. She's better to-day, and clearer; but what she have been these few days past, mortal tongue cannot tell — all delirium-like, and full of fancies, and talking of things which set Hannah — the girl who does for me — and me nearly out of our wits with fright. So much so, that six-and-sixpence a-week is — well, never mind, poor thing; it's worse for her than for us; but I'm glad, at any rate, some friend has come to see her."

"I'll go and do so at once, Mrs. Chapman," said Bowker. "I know my way; the door straight opposite to the front of the stairs, isn't it? Thank you; I'll find it;" and with the last words yet on his tongue, Mr. Bowker had passed round the little counter, by the little milliner, and was making the narrow staircase creak again with his weight.

He opened the door opposite to him, after having knocked and received no answer, and peered cautiously in. The daylight was fading, and the blind of the window was half down, and Bowker's eyesight was none of the best now, so that he took some little time before he perceived the outline of a figure stretched in the white dimity-covered easy-chair by the little Pembroke table in the middle of the room. Although some noise had been made by the opening of the door, the figure had not moved; it never stirred when Bowker gave a little premonitory cough to notify his advent; it remained in exactly the same position, without stirring hand or foot, when Bowker

said, "A friend has come to see you, Mrs. — Lambert." Then a dim undefined sense of terror came upon William Bowker, and he closed the door silently behind him, and advanced into the room. Immediately he became aware of a faint sickly smell, a cloying, percolating odour, which seemed to fill the place; but he had little time to think of this, for immediately before him lay the form of Margaret, her eyes closed, her features rigid, her long red hair falling in all its wild luxuriance over her shoulders. At first William thought she was dead; but, stooping close over her, he marked her slow laboured breathing, and noticed that from time to time her hands were unclenched, and then closed again as tightly as ever. He took a little water from a tumbler on the table and sprinkled it on her face, and laid his finger on her pulse; after a minute or two she opened her eyes, closing them again immediately, but after a time opening them again, and fixing them on Bowker's face with a long wistful gaze.

"Are you one of them also?" she asked, in a deep hushed voice. "How many more to come and gibber and point at me; or worse than all, to sit mutely staring at me with pitiless unforgiving eyes! How many more? You are the latest. I have never seen you before."

"O yes you have," said Bowker quietly, with her hand in his, and his eyes steadfastly fixed on hers — "O yes you have: you recollect me, my dear Mrs. Ludlow."

He laid special stress on the name, and as he uttered the words, Margaret started, a new light

flashed into her beautiful eyes, and she regarded him attentively.

"What was that you said?" she asked; "what name did you call me?"

"What name? Why, your own, of course; what else should I call you, my dear Mrs. Ludlow?"

She started again at the repetition, then her eyes fell, and she said dreamily,

"But that is not my name — that is not my name."

Bowker waited for a moment, and then said,

"You might as well pretend to have forgotten me and our talk at Elm Lodge that day that I came up to see Geoffrey."

"Elm Lodge! Geoffrey! — ah, good God, now I remember all!" said Margaret, in a kind of scream, raising herself in the chair, and wringing Bowker's hand.

"Hush, my dear madam; don't excite yourself; I thought you would remember all; you —"

"You are Mr. Bowker!" said Margaret, pressing her hand to her head; "Mr. Bowker, whose story Geoff told me: Geoff! ah, poor, good Geoff! ah, dear, good Geoff! But why are you here? he hasn't sent you? Geoffrey has not sent you?"

"Geoffrey does not know I am here. He has been very ill; too ill to be told of all that has been going on; too ill to understand it, if he had been told. I heard by accident that you were living here, and that you had been ill; and I came to see if I could be of any service to you."

While he had been speaking, Margaret had sat

with her head tightly clasped between her hands. When he finished, she looked up with a slightly dazed expression, and said, with an evident attempt at controlling her voice, "I see all now; you must pardon me, Mr. Bowker, for any incoherence or strangeness you may have noticed in my manner; but I have been very ill, and I feel sure that at times my mind wanders a little. I am better now. I was quite myself when you mentioned about your having heard of my illness, and offering me service; and I thank you very sincerely for your kindness."

Old William looked at her for a minute, and then said,

"I am a plain-spoken man, Mrs. Ludlow — for you are Mrs. Ludlow to me — as I daresay you may have heard, if you have not noticed it yourself; and I tell you plainly that it is out of no kindness to you that I am here now, but only out of love for my dear old friend."

"I can understand that," said Margaret; "and only respect you the more for it; and now you are here, Mr. Bowker, I shall be very glad to say a few words to you, — the last I shall ever say regarding that portion of my life which was passed in — at — You know what I would say; you have heard the story of the commencement of my acquaintance with Geoffrey Ludlow?"

Bowker bowed in acquiescence.

"You know how I left him — why I am here?"

Then William Bowker — the manner of all his friend's trouble and misery and crushed hopes and

wasted life rising up strongly within him — set his face hard, and said, between his clenched teeth, "I know your history from two sources. Yesterday, Geoffrey Ludlow, scarce able to raise himself in his bed, so weak was he from the illness which your conduct brought upon him, told me, as well as he could, of his first meeting with you, his strange courtship, his marriage, — at which I was present, — of his hopes and fears, and all the intricacies of his married life; of the manner in which, finally, you revealed the history of your previous life, and parted from him. Supplementing this story, he gave me to read a letter from Lord Caterham, the brother of the man you call your husband. This man, Captain Brakespere, flying from the country, had written to his brother, informing him that he had left behind him a woman who was called his mistress, but who was in reality his wife. To find this woman Lord Caterham made his care. He set the detectives to work, and had her tracked from place to place; continually getting news of, but never finding her. While he lived, Lord Caterham never slackened from the pursuit; finding his end approaching —"

"His end approaching! — the end of his life do you mean?"

"He is dead. But before he died, he delegated the duty of pursuit, of all men in the world, to Geoffrey Ludlow, who, in his blind ignorance, had stumbled upon the very woman a year before, had saved her from a miserable death, and, all unknowingly, had fondly imagined he had made her his loving wife."

"Ah, my God, this is too much! And Geoffrey Ludlow knows all this?"

"From Geoffrey Ludlow's lips I heard it not twenty-four hours since."

Margaret uttered a deep groan and buried her face in her hands. When she raised her head her eyes were tear-blurred, and her voice faltered as she said, "I acknowledge my sin, and — so far as Geoffrey Ludlow is concerned — I deeply, earnestly repent my conduct. It was prompted by despair; it ended in desperation. Have those who condemned me — and I know naturally enough I am condemned by all his friends — have those who condemned me ever known the pangs of starvation, the grim tortures of houselessness in the streets? Have they ever known what it is to have the iron of want and penury eating into their souls, and then to be offered a comfortable home and an honest man's love? If they have, I doubt very much whether they would have refused it. I do not say this to excuse myself. I have done Geoffrey Ludlow deadly wrong; but when I listened to his proffered protestations, I gave him time for reflection; when I said 'Yes' to his repeated vows, I thought that the dead past had buried its dead, and that no ghost from it would arise to trouble the future. I vowed to myself that I would be true to that man who had so befriended me; and I was true to him. The life I led was inexpressibly irksome and painful to me; the dead solemn monotony of it goaded me almost to madness at times; but I bore it — bore it all out of gratitude to him — would have borne it till now if *he* had not come back to

lure me to destruction. I do not say I did my duty; I am naturally undomestic and unfitted for household management; but I brought no slur on Geoffrey Ludlow's name in thought or deed until that man returned. I have seen him, Mr. Bowker; I have spoken to him, and he spurned me from him; and yet I love him as I loved him years ago. He need only raise his finger, and I would fly to him and fawn upon him, and be grateful if he but smiled upon me in return. They cannot understand this — they cannot understand my disregard of the respectabilities by flinging away the position and the name and the repute, and all that which they had fitted to me, and which clung to me, ah, so irritatingly; but if all I have heard be true, you can understand it, Mr. Bowker, — you can. — Is Geoffrey out of danger?"

The sudden change in the tone of her voice, as she uttered the last sentence, struck on Bowker's ear, and looking up, he noticed a strange light in her eyes.

"Geoffrey is out of danger," he replied; "but he is still very weak, and requires the greatest care."

"And requires the greatest care!" she repeated. "Well, he'll get it, I suppose; but not from me. And to think that I shall never see him again! Poor Geoffrey! poor, good Geoffrey! How good he was, and how grave! — with those large earnest eyes of his, and his great head, and rough curling brown hair, and — the cruel cold, the pitiless rain, the cruel, cruel cold!" As she said these words, she crept back shivering into her chair, and wrapped her

dress round her. William Bowker bent down and gazed at her steadily; but after an instant she averted her face, and hid it in the chair. Bowker took her hand, and it fell passively into his own; he noticed that it was burning.

"This will not do, Mrs. Ludlow!" he exclaimed; "you have over-excited yourself lately. You want rest and looking after — you must —" he stopped; for she had turned her head to him again and was rocking herself backwards and forwards in her chair, weeping meanwhile as though her heart would break. The sight was too much for William to bear unaided, and he opened the door and called Mrs. Chapman.

"Ah, sir," said the good little woman when she entered the room, "she's off again, I see. I knew she was, for I heard that awful sobbing as I was coming up the stairs. O, that awful sobbing that I've laid awake night after night listening to, and that never seemed to stop till daylight, when she was fairly wore out. But that's nothing, sir, compared to the talk when she's beside herself. Then she'd go on and say —"

"Yes, yes, no doubt, Mrs. Chapman," interrupted Bowker, who did not particularly wish to be further distressed by the narration of Margaret's sadness; "but this faintness, these weeping fits, are quite enough to demand the instant attention of a medical man. If you'll kindly look to her now, I'll go off and fetch a doctor; and if there's a nurse required — as I've little doubt there will be — you won't mind me intruding further upon you? No; I knew

you'd say so. Mrs. Lambert's friends will ever be grateful to you; and here's something just to carry you on, you know, Mrs. Chapman — rent and money paid on her account, and that sort of thing." The something was two sovereigns, which had lain in a lucifer-match box used by Mr. Bowker as his bank, and kept by him in his only locked drawer for six weeks past, and which had been put aside for the purchase of a "tweed wrapper" for winter wear.

Deliberating within himself to what physician of eminence he should apply, and grievously hampered by the fact that he was unable to pay any fee in advance, Bowker suddenly bethought him of Dr. Rollit, whose great love of art and its professors led him, "in the fallow leisure of his life," to constitute himself a kind of honorary physician to the brotherhood of the brush. To him Bowker hastened, and, without divulging Margaret's identity, explained the case, and implored the doctor to see her at once. The doctor hesitated for a moment, for he was at his easel and in a knot. He had "got something that would not come right," and he scarcely seemed inclined to move until he had conquered his difficulty; but after explaining the urgency of the case, old Bowker took the palette and sheaf of brushes from the physician's hand and said, "I think we can help each other at this moment, doctor: go you and see the patient, and leave me to deal with this difficulty. You'll find me here when you come back, and you shall then look at your canvas."

But when Dr. Rollit, after a couple of hours' absence, returned, he did not look at his picture —

at least on his first entry. He looked so grave and earnest that William Bowker, moving towards him to ask the result of his visit, was frightened, and stopped.

"What is the matter?" he asked; "you seem —"

"I'm a little taken aback — that's all, old friend," said the doctor; "you did not prepare me to find in my patient an old acquaintance — you did not know it, perhaps?"

"By Jove! I remember now: Charley Potts said — What an old ass I am!"

"I was called in by Potts and Ludlow, or rather called out of a gathering of the Titians, to attend Mrs. Lambert, as the landlady called her, nearly two years ago. She is not much altered — outwardly — since I left her convalescent."

"You lay a stress on 'outwardly' — what is the inner difference?"

"Simply that her health is gone, my good fellow; her whole constitution utterly shattered; her life not worth a week's purchase."

"Surely you're wrong, doctor. Up to within the last few weeks her health has been excellent."

"My dear William Bowker, I, as an amateur, meddle with your professional work; but what I do is on the surface, and the mistakes I make are so glaring, that they are recognisable instantly. You might meddle, as an amateur, with mine, and go pottering on until you'd killed half a parish, without any body suspecting you. The disease I attended Mrs. — there! it's absurd our beating about the bush any longer — Mrs. Ludlow for was rheumatic

fever, caught from exposure to cold and damp. The attack I now find left behind it, as it generally does, a strong predisposition to heart-disease, which, from what I learn from her, seems, to have displayed itself in spasms and palpitations very shortly afterwards."

"From what you learn from her? She was sensible, then, when you saw her?"

"She was sensible before I left her; ay, and that's the deuce of it. Partly to deaden the pain of these attacks, partly, as she said herself just now, to escape from thought, she has had recourse to a sedative, morphia, which she has taken in large quantities. I smelt it the instant I entered her room, and found the bottle by her side. Under this influence she is deadened and comatose; but when the reaction comes — Poor creature! poor creature!" and the kind-hearted doctor shook his head sadly.

"Do you consider her in absolute danger?" asked Bowker, after a pause.

"My dear fellow, it is impossible to say how long she may last; but — though I suppose that's out of the question now, eh? — people will talk, you know, and I've heard rumours; — but if her husband wished to see her, I should say fetch him at once."

"If her husband wished to see her!" said old Bowker to himself, as he walked away towards his lodgings, — "if her husband wished to see her! He don't — at least the real one don't, I imagine; and Geoff mustn't; though, if he knew it, nothing

would keep him away. But that other — Captain Brakespere — he ought to know the danger she's in; he ought to have the chance of saying a kind word to her before — He must be a damned villain!" said old William, stopping for an instant, and pondering over the heads of the story; "but he deserves that chance, and he shall have it."

Pursuant to his determination, Mr. Bowker presented himself the next day at Long's Hotel, where he recollected Mr. Blackett had informed him that Captain Brakespere was stopping. The porter, immediately divining from Mr. Bowker's outward appearance that he meditated a raid upon coats, hats, or any thing that might be lying about the coffee-room, barricaded the entrance with his waistcoat, and parleyed with the visitor in the hall. Inquiring for Captain Brakespere, Mr. Bowker was corrected by the porter, who opined "he meant Lord Catrum." The correction allowed and the inquiry repeated, the porter replied that his "lordship had leff," and referred the inquirer to St. Barnabas Square.

To St. Barnabas Square Mr. Bowker adjourned, but there learned that Lord Caterham had left town with Mr. Barford, and would not be back for some days.

And meanwhile the time was wearing by, and Margaret's hold on life was loosening day by day. Would it fail altogether before she saw the man who had deceived her so cruelly? would it fail altogether before she saw the man whom she had so cruelly deceived?

CHAPTER VIII.

In the Deep Shadow.

In the presence of the double sorrow which had fallen upon her, Annie Maurice's girlhood died out. Arthur was gone, and Geoffrey in so suffering a condition of body and mind that it would have been easier to the tender-hearted girl to know that he was at rest, even though she had to face all the loneliness which would then have been her lot. Her position was very trying in all its aspects at this time; for there was little sympathy with her new sorrow at the great house which she still called home, and where she was regarded as decidedly "odd." Lady Beauport considered that Caterham had infected her with some of his strange notions, and that her fancy for associating with "queer" people, removed from her own sphere not more by her heiress-ship than by her residence in an earl's house and her recognition as a member of a noble family, was chargeable to the eccentric notions of her son. Annie came and went as she pleased, free from comment, though not from observation: but she was of a sensitive nature; she could not assert herself, and she suffered from the consciousness that her grief, her anxiety, and her constant visits to Lowbar were regarded with mingled censure and contempt. Her preoccupation of mind prevented her noticing many things which otherwise could not have escaped her atten-

tion; but when Geoffrey's illness ceased to be actively dangerous, and the bulletin brought her each morning from Til by the hands of the faithful Charley contained more tranquillising but still sad accounts of the patient, she began to observe an air of mystery and preparation in the household. The few hours which she forced herself to pass daily in the society of Lady Beauport had been very irksome to her since Arthur died, and she had been glad when they were curtailed by Lady Beauport's frequent plea of "business" in the evenings, and her leaving the drawing-room for her own apartments. Every afternoon she went to Elm Lodge, and her presence was eagerly hailed by Mrs. Ludlow and Til. She had seen Geoffrey frequently during the height of the fever; but since the letter she had kept in such faithful custody had reached his hands she had not seen him. Though far from even the vaguest conjecture of the nature of its contents she had dreaded the effect of receiving a communication from his dead friend on Geoffrey Ludlow, and had been much relieved when his mother told her, on the following day, that he was very calm and quiet, but did not wish to see any one for a few days. Bowker and he had fully felt the embarrassment of the position in which Lord Caterham's revelation had placed Geoffrey with regard to Annie Maurice, and the difficulties which the complications produced by Margaret's identity with Lionel Brakespere's wife added to Ludlow's fulfilment of Caterham's trust. They had agreed — or rather Bowker had suggested, and Geoffrey had acquiesced, with the languid assent of

a mind too much enfeebled by illness and sorrow to be capable of facing any difficulty but the inevitable, immediate, and pressing — that Annie need know nothing for the present.

"She could hardly come here from the Beauports, Geoff," Bowker had said; "it's all nonsense, of course, to men like you and me, who look at the real, and know how its bitterness takes all the meaning out of the rubbish they call rules of society; but the strongest woman is no freer than Gulliver in his fetters of packthread, in the conventional world she lives in. We need not fret her sooner than it must be done, and you had better not see her for the present."

So Annie came and went for two or three days and did not see Geoffrey. Mrs. Ludlow, having recovered from the sudden shock of her son's illness and the protracted terror of his danger, had leisure to feel a little affronted at his desire for seclusion, and to wonder audibly why *she* should be supposed to do him more harm than Mr. Bowker.

"A big blundering fellow like that, Til," she said; "and I do assure you, Miss Maurice, he quite forgot the time for the draught when he was shut up there with him the other day — and talk of *he's* doing Geoffrey no harm! All I can say is, if Geoffrey had not been crying when I went into his room, and wasn't trembling all over in his bed, I never was so mistaken before."

Then Til and Annie looked blankly at each other, in mute wonder at this incomprehensible sorrow — for the women knew nothing but that Mar-

garet hed fled with a former lover — so much had been necessarily told them, under Bowker's instructions, by Charley Potts; and Annie, after a little, went sorrowfully away.

That day at dinner Lord Beauport was more than usually kind in his manner to her; and Annie considered it due to him, and a fitting return for some inquiries he had made for "her friend," which had more of warmth and less of condescension than usual in their tone, to rouse herself into greater cheerfulness than she had yet been able to assume. Lady Beauport rose sooner than usual; and the two ladies had hardly seated themselves in the dreary drawing-room when the Earl joined them. There was an air of preparation in Lord Beauport's manner, and Annie felt that something had happened.

The thing which had happened was this — Lady Beauport had not miscalculated her experienced power of managing her husband. She had skilfully availed herself of an admission made by him that Lionel's absence, at so great a distance just then, was an unfortunate complication; that the necessary communications were rendered difficult and tedious; and that he wished his "rustication" had been nearer home. The Countess caught at the word 'rustication:' then not expulsion, not banishment, was in her husband's mind. Here was a commutation of her darling's sentence; a free pardon would follow, if she only set about procuring it in the right way. So she resorted to several little expedients by which the inconvenience of the heir's absence was made more and more apparent: having once mentioned his

name, Lord Beauport continued to do so; — perhaps he was in his secret heart as much relieved by the breaking of the ban as the mother herself; — and at length, on the same day which witnessed William Bowker's visit to Lionel Brakespere's deserted wife, Lady Beauport acknowledged to her husband that their son was then in London, and that she had seen him. The Earl received her communication in frowning silence; but she affected not to observe his manner, and expatiated, with volubility very unusual to her, upon the fortunate concurrence of circumstances which had brought Lionel to England just as his improved position made it more than ever probable he would be perfectly well received.

"That dear Mr. Barford," she said — and her face never changed at the name of the man in whose arms her son had died so short a time before — "assures me that every one is delighted to see him. And really, George, he mustn't stay at Long's, you know — it looks so bad — for every one knows he's in town; and if we don't receive him properly, that will be just the way to rake up old stories. I'm sure they're old enough to be forgotten; and many a young man has done worse than Lionel, and —"

"Stop, Gertrude," said Lord Beauport sternly; "stick to the truth, if you please. I hope very few young men in our son's position have disgraced it and themselves as he has done. The truth is, that we have to make the best of a misfortune. He has returned; and by so doing has added to the rest a fresh rascality by breaking his pledged word. Circumstances oblige me to acquiesce, — luck is on his

side, — his brother's death —" Lord Beauport paused for a moment, and an expression, hitherto unfamiliar, but which his wife frequently saw in the future, flitted over his face — "his brother's death leaves me no choice. Let us say as little as possible on this subject. He had better come here, for every reason. For appearances' sake it is well; and he will probably be under some restraint in this house." Here the Earl turned to leave the room, and said slowly as he walked towards the door, "Something tells me, Gertrude, that in Arthur's death, which we dreaded too little and mourn too lightly, we have seen only the beginning of evils."

Lady Beauport sat very still and felt very cold after he left her. Conscience smote her dumbly, — in days to come it would find a voice in which to speak, — and fear fell upon her. "I will never say any thing to him about Annie Maurice," she said to herself, as the first effect of her husband's words began to pass away; "I do believe he would be as hard on Lionel as poor Arthur himself, and warn the girl against him."

How relieved she felt as she despatched a note to Lionel Brakespere, telling him she had fulfilled her task, and inviting him to return to his father's house when he pleased!

Assuredly the star of the new heir was in the ascendant; his brother was dead, his place restored to him, and society ready to condone all his "follies," — which is the fashionable synonym for the crimes of the rich and the great. If Lionel Brakespere could have seen "that cursed woman" — as in his brutal anger

he called his wife a hundred times over, as he fretted and fumed over the remembrance of their interview — as William Bowker saw her that day, — he would have esteemed himself a luckier fellow still than he did when he lighted his cigar with his mother's note, and thought how soon he would change that "infernal dull old hole" from what it was in Caterham's time, and how he would have every thing his own way now.

Such, as far as his knowledge of them extended and without any comment or expression of opinion of his own, were the circumstances which Lord Beauport narrated to Annie. She received his information with an indescribable pang, compounded of a thousand loving remembrances of Arthur and a keen resuscitation by her memory of the scene of Lionel's disgrace, to which she and her lost friend had been witnesses. She could hardly believe, hardly understand it all; and the clearest thought which arose above the surging troubled sea within her breast was, that the place which knew Arthur no more would be doubly empty and desolate when Lionel should fill it.

The tone in which Lord Beauport had spoken was grave and sad, and he had confined himself to the barest announcement. Annie had listened in respectful silence; but though she had not looked directly at her, she was conscious of Lady Beauport's reproachful glances, addressed to her husband, as he concluded by saying coldly,

"You were present, Annie, by my desire, when I declared that that which is now about to happen

should never be, and I have thought it necessary to explain to you a course of conduct on my part which without explanation would have appeared very weak and inconsistent. As a member of *my* family you are entitled to such an explanation; and indeed, as an inmate of this house, you are entitled to an apology."

"Thank you, my lord," said Annie, in a voice which, though lower than usual, was very firm.

This was more than Lady Beauport's pride could bear. She began, fiercely enough,

"Really, Lord Beauport, I cannot see —"

But at that moment a servant opened the door, and announced

"Lord Caterham."

The group by the fireside stood motionless for a moment, as Lionel, dressed in deep mourning, advanced towards them with well-bred ease and perfect unconcern. Then Lady Beauport threw herself into his arms; and Annie, hardly noticing that Lord Beauport had by an almost involuntary movement stretched out his hand to the handsome prodigal, glided past the three, hurried to her own room, and, having locked the door, sank down on her knees beside her bed in an agony of grief.

Three days elapsed, during which events marched with a steady pace at Elm Lodge and at the lodging where the woman who had brought such wreck and ruin within that tranquil-looking abode was lying contending with grief and disease, dying the death of despair and exhaustion. When Bowker returned from his unsuccessful quest for Lionel Brakespere, he found that she had passed into another phase of

her malady, — was quiet, dreamy, and apparently forgetful of the excitement she had undergone. She was lying quite still on her bed, her eyes half closed, and a faint unmeaning smile was on her lips.

"I've seen her so for hours and hours, sir," said the gentle little landlady; "and it's my belief it's what she takes as does it."

So Bowker concluded that Margaret had found means to avail herself of the fatal drug from which she had sought relief so often and so long, in the interval of depression which had succeeded the delirium he had witnessed. He was much embarrassed now to know how to proceed. She required better accommodation and careful nursing, and he was determined she should have both, — but how that was to be managed was the question; and Bowker, the most helpless man in the world in such matters, was powerless to answer it. He had never imagined, as he had turned the probabilities over and over in his mind, that such a complication as severe physical illness would arise; and it routed all his plans, besides engaging all his most active sympathies. William Bowker had an extreme dread, indeed a positive terror, of witnessing bodily suffering in women and children; and had his anger and repulsion towards Margaret been far greater than they were, they would have yielded to pain and pity as he gazed upon the rigid lines of the pale weary face, from which the beauty was beginning to fade and drop away in some mysterious manner of vanishing, terrible to see and feel, but impossible to describe. He made the best provisional arrangements within his

power, and went away, promising Mrs. Chapman that he would return on the following day to meet the doctor, and turned his steps in much mental bewilderment towards the abode of Charley Potts, purposing to consult him in the emergency, previous to their proceeding together to Lowbar.

"I can't help it now," he thought; "the women cannot possibly be kept out of the business any longer. If she were let to want any thing, and had not every care taken of her, dear old Geoff would never forgive any of us; and it could not be hidden from him. I am sure she's dying; and — I'm glad of it: glad for her sake, poor wretched creature; and O so glad for his! He will recover her death — he *must;* but I doubt whether he would recover her life. He would be for ever hankering after her, for ever remembering the past, and throwing away the remainder of his life, as he has thrown away too much of it already. No, no, dear old Geoff, this shall not be, if your William can save you. I know what a wasted life means; and you shall put yours out at good interest, Geoff, please God."

Charley was at home; and he received Mr. Bowker's communication with uncommon gravity, and immediately bestowed his best attention upon considering what was to be done. He was not in the least offended by discovering that it had not been his William's intention to tell him any thing about it. "Quite right too," he observed. "I should have been of no use, if every thing had not been capsized by her illness; and I don't like to know any thing I'm not to tell to Til. Not that she's in

the least inquisitive, you know, — don't make any mistake about that, — but things are in such an infernally mysterious mess; and then they only know enough to make them want to know more; and I shouldn't like, under these circumstances — it would seem hypocritical, don't you see — and every thing must come out sometime, eh?"

"O yes, I see," said Bowker drily; "but I have to tell you *now*, Charley; for what the devil's to be done? You can't bring her here and nurse her; and I can't bring her to my place and nurse her, — yet she must be taken somewhere and nursed; and we must be prepared with a satisfactory account of every thing we have done, when Geoff gets well; and what are we to do?"

Mr. Potts did not answer for a few moments, but handed over the beer in an absent manner to Mr. Bowker; then, starting up from the table on which he had been sitting, he exclaimed,

"I have it, William. Let's tell the women — Til, I mean, and Miss Maurice. They'll know all about it, bless you," said Charley, whose confidence in female resources was unbounded. "It's all nonsense trying to keep things dark, when they've got to such a pass as this. If Mrs. Ludlow's in the state you say, she will not live long; and then Geoff's difficulty, if not his trouble, will be over. Her illness alters every thing. Come on, Bowker; let's get on to Elm Lodge; tell Til, and Miss Maurice, if she's there; and let them make proper arrangements."

"But, Charley," said Bowker, much relieved, in

spite of his misgivings, by the suggestion, "you forget one important point. Miss Maurice is Brakespere's cousin, and she lives in his father's house. It won't do to bring her in."

"Never you mind that, William," replied the impetuous Charley. "Til can't act alone; and old Mrs. Ludlow is nervous, and would not know what to do, and must not be told; and I am sure Miss Maurice doesn't care a rap about her cousin — the ruffian — why should she? And I know she would do any thing in the world, no matter how painful to herself, and no matter whether he ever came to know it or not, that would serve or please Geoff."

"Indeed!" said Bowker, in a tone half of inquiry, half of surprise, and looking very hard at Charley; "and how do you know that, eh, Charley?"

"O, bother," answered that gentleman, "I don't know how I know it; but I do know it; and I am sure the sooner we act on my knowledge the better. So come along."

So saying, Mr. Potts made his simple out-door toilet; and the two gentlemen went out, and took their way towards the resort of omnibuses, eagerly discussing the matter in hand as they went, and Mr. Bowker finding himself unexpectedly transformed from the active into the passive party.

It was agreed between them that Geoffrey should not be informed of Bowker's presence in the house, as he would naturally be impatient to learn the result of the mission with which he had intrusted him; and that result it was their present object to conceal.

Fortune favoured the wishes of Bowker and

Charley. Mrs. Ludlow was with her son; and in the drawing-room, which was resuming somewhat of its former orderly and pleasant appearance, they found Miss Maurice and Til. The two girls were looking sad and weary, and Til was hardly brightened up by Charley's entrance, for he looked so much more grave than usual, that she guessed at once he had heard something new and important. The little party were too vitally interested in Geoffrey and his fortunes, and the occasion was too solemn for any thing of ceremony; and when Charley Potts had briefly introduced Bowker to Annie Maurice, he took Til's hand in his, and said,

"Til, Geoffrey's wife has been found — alone, and very ill — dying, as we believe!"

"You are quite sure, William?"

"I am quite sure, Geoffrey. Do you think I would deceive you, or take any thing for granted myself, without seeing and hearing what is so important to you? She is well cared for in every respect. Your own care, when she needed it before, was not more tender or more effective. Be satisfied, dear old Geoff; be content."

"You saw her — you really saw her; and she spoke kindly of me?" asked Geoffrey with a pitiable eagerness which pained Bowker to witness.

"I did. Yes, have I not told you again and again —" Then there was a moment's silence; and Bowker thought, if she were not dying, how terrible this tenderness towards her would be, how

inexplicable to all the world but him, how ruinous to Geoffrey; but as it was, it did not matter: it would soon be only the tenderness of memory, the pardon of the grave.

Geoffrey was sitting in an arm-chair by the bedroom window, which overlooked the pretty flower-garden and the lawn. He was very weak still, but health was returning, and with it the power of acute mental suffering, which severe bodily illness mercifully deadens. This had been a dreadful day to him. When he was able to sit up and look around the room, from which all the graceful suggestive traces of a woman's presence had been carefully removed; when he saw the old home look upon every thing before his eyes (for whom the idea of home was for ever desecrated and destroyed), the truth presented itself to him as it had never before done, in equal horror and intensity, since the day the woman he loved had struck him a blow by her words which had nearly proved mortal. Would it had been so! he thought, as his large brown eyes gazed wearily out upon the lawn and the flower-beds, and then were turned upon the familiar objects in the chamber, and closed with a shudder. His large frame looked gaunt and worn, and his hands rested listlessly upon the sides of his chair. He had requested them to leave him alone for a little, that he might rest previous to seeing Bowker.

From the window at which Geoffrey sat he could see the nurse walking monotonously up and down the gravel-walk which bounded his little demesne with the child in her arms. Sometimes she stopped

to pluck a flower and give it to the baby, who would laugh with delight and then throw it from him. Geoffrey watched the pair for a little, and then turned his head wearily away and put his question to Bowker, who was seated beside him, and who looked at him furtively with glances of the deepest concern.

"You shall hear how she is, Geoff, — how circumstanced, how cared for, and by whom, from one who can tell you the story better than I can. Your confidence has not been misplaced." Geoffrey turned upon him the nervous anxious gaze which is so touching to see in the eyes of one who has lately neared the grave, and still seems to hover about its brink. William Bowker proceeded: "You have not asked for Miss Maurice lately. I daresay you felt too much oppressed by the information in Lord Caterham's letter, too uncertain of the future, too completely unable to make up your mind what was to be done about her, to care or wish to see her. She has been here as usual, making herself as useful as possible, and helping your mother and sister in every conceivable way. But she has done more for you than that, Geoff; and if you are able to see her now, I think you had better hear it all from herself."

With these words Bowker hurried out of the room; and in a few minutes Annie Maurice, pale, quiet, and self-possessed, came in, and took her seat beside Geoffrey.

What had she come to tell him? What had she been doing for the help and service of her early friend, — she, this young girl so unskilled in the

world's ways, so lonely, so dependent hitherto, — who now looked so womanly and sedate, — in whose brown eyes he saw such serious thought, such infinite sweetness and pity, — whose deep-mourning dress clothed her slender figure with a sombre dignity new to it, and on whom a nameless change had passed, which Geoffrey had eyes to see now, and recognised even in that moment of painful emotion with wonder.

Calmly, carefully subduing every trace of embarrassment for his sake, and in a business-like tone which precluded the necessity for any preliminary explanation, Annie told Geoffrey Ludlow that she had been made aware of the circumstances which had preceded and caused his illness. She touched lightly upon her sorrow and her sympathy, but passed on to the subject of Caterham's letter. Geoffrey listened to her in silence, his head turned away and his eyes covered with his hand. Annie went on:

"I little thought, Geoffrey, when I was so glad to find that you were well enough to read Arthur's letter, and when I only thought of fulfilling so urgent a request as soon as I could, and perhaps diverting your mind into thoughts of our dear dead friend, that I was to be the means of making all this misery plain and intelligible. But it was so, Geoffrey; and I now see that it was well. Why Arthur should have selected you to take up the search after his death I cannot tell, — I suppose he knew instinctively your fidelity and true-heartedness; but the accident was very fortunate, for it identified your interests and mine, it made the fulfilment of

his trust a sacred duty to me, and enabled me to do with propriety what no one else could have done, and what she — what Margaret — would not have accepted from another."

Geoffrey started, let his hand fall from his face, and caught hers. "Is it you, then, Annie?"

"Yes, yes," she said, "it is I, Geoffrey; do not agitate yourself, but listen to me. When Mr. Bowker found Margaret, as you know he did, she was very ill, and — she had no protector and no money. What could he do? He did the best thing; he told me, to whom Arthur's wishes were sacred, who would have done the same had you never existed — you know I am rich and free; and I made all the needful arrangements for her at once. When all was ready for her reception — it is a pretty house at Sydenham, Geoffrey, and she is as well cared for as any one can be — I went to her, and told her I was come to take her home."

"And she — Margaret — did she consent? Did she think it was I who —"

"Who sent me?" interrupted Annie. "No, — she would not have consented; for her feeling is that she has so wronged you that she must owe nothing to you any more. In this I know she is quite wrong; for to know that she was in any want or suffering would be still worse grief to you, — but that can never be, — and I did not need to contradict her. I told her I came to her in a double character; that of her own friend — though she had not had much friendship for me, Geoffrey; but that is beside the question — and — and —" here she

hesitated for a moment, but then took courage and went on, "that of her husband's cousin." Geoffrey ground his teeth, but said never a word. She continued, with deepening light in her eyes and growing tenderness in her voice, "I told her how Arthur, whom I loved, had sought for her, — how a strange fatality had brought them in contact, neither knowing how near an interest each had in the other. She knew it the day she fainted in his room, but he died without knowing it, and so dying left her, as I told her I felt she was, a legacy to me. She softened then, Geoffrey, and she came with me."

Here Annie paused, as if expecting he would speak, but he did not. She glanced at him, but his face was set and rigid, and his eyes were fixed upon the walk, where the nurse and child still were.

"She is very ill, Geoffrey," Annie went on; "very weak and worn, and weary of life. I am constantly with her, but sometimes she is unable or unwilling to speak to me. She is gloomy and reserved, and suffers as much in mind as in body, I am sure."

Geoffrey said slowly, "Does she ever speak to you of me?"

Annie replied, "Not often. When she does, it is always with the greatest sorrow for your sorrow, and the deepest sense of the injury she has done you. I am going to her to-day, Geoffrey, and I should like to take to her an assurance of your forgiveness. May I tell Margaret that you forgive her?"

He turned hastily, and said with a great gasp, "O Annie, tell her that I love her!"

"I will tell her that," the girl said gently and

sadly, and an expression of pain crossed her face. She thought of the love that had been wasted, and the life that had been blighted.

"What is she going to do?" asked Geoffrey; "how is it to be in the future?" This was a difficult question for Annie to answer: she knew well what lay in the future; but she dreaded to tell Geoffrey, even while she felt that the wisest, the easiest, the best, and the most merciful solution of the terrible dilemma in which a woman's ungoverned passion had placed so many innocent persons was surely and not slowly approaching.

"I don't know, Geoffrey," she said; "I cannot tell you. Nothing can be decided upon until she is better, and you are well enough to advise and direct us. Try and rest satisfied for the present. She is safe, no harm can come to her; and I am able and willing to befriend her now as you did before. Take comfort, Geoffrey; it is all dreadful; but if we had not found her, how much worse it would have been!"

At this moment the nurse carried her charge out of their sight, as she came towards the house, and Annie, thinking of the more than motherless child, wondered at the no-meaning of her own words, and how any thing could have been worse than what had occurred.

She and Geoffrey had spoken very calmly to each other, and there had been no demonstration of gratitude to her on his part; but it would be impossible to tell the thankfulness which filled his heart. It was a feeling of respite which possessed him. The dreadful misfortune which had fallen upon him

was as real and as great as ever; but he could rest from the thought of it, from its constant torture, now that he knew that she was safe from actual physical harm; now that no awful vision of a repetition of the destitution and misery from which he had once rescued her, could come to appal him. Like a man who, knowing that the morrow will bring him a laborious task to do, straining his powers to the utmost, inexorable and inevitable in its claims, covets the deep rest of the hours which intervene between the present and the hour which must summon him to his toil, Geoffrey, in the lassitude of recent illness, in the weakness of early convalescence, rested from the contemplation of his misery. He had taken Annie's communication very quietly; he had a sort of feeling that it ought to surprise him very much, that the circumstances were extraordinary, that the chain of events was a strangely-wrought one — but he felt little surprise; it was lurking somewhere in his mind, he would feel it all by and by, no doubt; but nothing beyond relief was very evident to him in his present state. He wondered, indeed, how it was with Annie herself; how the brave, devoted, and unselfish girl had been able, trammelled as she was by the rules and restrictions of a great house, to carry out her benevolent designs, and dispose of her own time after her own fashion. There was another part of the subject which Geoffrey did not approach even in his thoughts. Bowker had not told him of Margaret's entreaties that she might see Lionel Brakespere; he had not told him that the young man had returned to his father's house; and he made

no reference to him in his consideration of Annie's position. He had no notion that the circumstances in which Lord Caterham had entreated his protection for Annie had already arisen.

"How is it that you can do all this unquestioned, Annie?" he asked; "how can you be so much away from home?"

She answered him with some embarrassment. "It was difficult — a little — but I knew I was right, and I did not suffer interference. When you are quite well, Geoffrey, I want your advice for myself. I have none else, you know, since Arthur died."

"He knew that, Annie; and the purport of the letter which told me such a terrible story was to ask me in all things to protect and guide you. He little knew that he had the most effectual safe-guard in his own hands; for, Annie, the danger he most dreaded for you was association with his brother."

"That can never be," she said vehemently. "No matter what your future course of action may be, Geoffrey, whether you expose him or not — in which, of course, you will consider Margaret only — I will never live under the same roof with him. I must find another home, Geoffrey, let what will come of it, and let them say what they will."

"Caterham would have been much easier in his mind, Annie," said Geoffrey, with a sad smile, "if he had known how baseless were his fears that his brother would one day win your heart."

"There never could have been any danger of that, Geoffrey," said Annie, with a crimson blush, which had not subsided when she took her leave of him.

CHAPTER IX.

Closing in.

The porter at Lord Beauport's mansion in St. Barnabas Square became so familiarised with Mr. Bowker's frequent visits as at length to express no surprise at the sight of the "hold cove," who daily arrived to inquire whether any tidings of Lord Caterham had been received. Although the porter's experience of life had been confined to London, his knowledge of the ways of men was great; and he was perfectly certain that this pertinacious inquirer was no dun, no tradesman with an overdue account, no begging-letter writer or impostor of any kind. What he was the porter could not tell; mentioned, in casual chat with the footman waiting for the carriage to come round, that he could not "put a name" to him, but thought from his "rum get-up" that he was either in the picture-selling or the money-lending line.

Undeterred by, because ignorant of, the curiosity which his presence excited — and indeed it may be assumed that, had he been aware of it, his actions would have been very little influenced thereby — old William Bowker attended regularly every day at the St. Barnabas-Square mansion, and having asked his question and received his answer, adjourned to the nearest tavern for his lunch of bread-and-cheese and beer, and then puffing a big meerschaum pipe,

scaled the omnibus which conveyed him to London Bridge, whence he took the train for the little house at Sydenham. They were always glad to see him there, even though he brought no news; and old Mrs. Ludlow especially found the greatest comfort in pouring into his open ears the details of the latest experience of her "cross." William Bowker to such recitals was a splendid listener; that is to say, he could nod his head and throw in an "Indeed!" or a "Really!" exactly at the proper moment, while all the time his thoughts were far away, occupied with some important matter. He saw Til occasionally, and sometimes had flying snatches of talk with Annie Maurice in the intervals of her attendance on the invalid. Bowker did not meet Charley Potts very frequently, although that gentleman was a regular visitor at Sydenham whenever Mrs. Ludlow and Til were there; but it was not until the evening that Mr. Potts came, for he was diligently working away at his commissions and growing into great favour with Mr. Caniche; and besides he had no particular interest in Miss Maurice; and so long as he arrived in time to escort Miss Til and her mother back to London Bridge and to put them into the Lowbar omnibus, he was content, and was especially grateful for the refreshing sleep which always came upon old Mrs. Ludlow in the train.

At length, when many weary days had worn themselves away, and Geoffrey was beginning to feel his old strength returning to him, and with it the aching void which he had experienced on regaining consciousness daily increasing in intensity, and when Margaret's

hold on life had grown very weak indeed, old William Bowker, making his daily inquiry of Lord Beauport's porter, was informed that Lord Caterham had returned the previous afternoon, and was at that moment at breakfast. Then, with great deliberation, Mr. Bowker unbuttoned his coat and from an inner breast-pocket produced an old leather pocket-book, from which, among bits of sketches and old envelopes, he took a card, and pencilling his name thereon, requested the porter to give it to Lord Caterham.

The porter looked at the card, and then said jocosely, "You ain't wrote your business on it, then? 'Spose you couldn't do that, eh? Well, you are a plucked 'un, you are, and I like you for it, never givin' in and comin' so reg'lar; and I'll let him have your card just for that reason." He disappeared as he said these words, but came back speedily remarking, "He'll see you, he says, though he don't know the name. Do you know the way? Same rooms which his brother used to have, — straight afore you. Here, I'll show you."

The friendly porter, preceding Mr. Bowker down the passage, opened the door of what had been poor Arthur's sitting-room, and ushered in the visitor. The bookcases, the desk, the pictures and nicknacks, were all as they had been in the old days; but there was a table in the middle of the room, at which was seated the new Lord Caterham finishing his late breakfast. Bowker had never seen the Lionel Brakespere of former days; if he had, he would have noticed the change in the man before him, — the

boldness of bearing, the calm unflinching regard, the steadiness of voice, the assurance of manner, — all of which, though characteristic of Lionel Brakespere in his earliest days, had deserted him, only to reappear with his title.

"You wished to see me, Mr. ——. I don't know your name," said Lionel, stiffly returning the stiff bow which Bowker gave him on entering.

"You have my card, my lord," said old Bowker quietly.

"Ah, yes, by the way, I have your card," said Lionel, taking it up. "Mr. Bowker — Mr. — Bowker! Now that does not convey to me any idea whatever!"

"I daresay not. You never heard it before — you never saw me before; and you would not see me now, if I did not come on business of the greatest importance."

"Business of the greatest importance! Dear me, that's what they all come on. Of the greatest importance to yourself, of course?"

"Of the greatest importance to you. Except in a very minor degree, I've nothing to do in the matter."

"Of the greatest importance to me! O, of course — else it would not have been worth while your coming, would it? Now, as my time is valuable, be good enough to let me know what this business is."

"You shall know in as few words as I can tell you. I come to you from a woman —"

Lionel interrupted him with a cynical laugh.

"The deuce you do!" he said. "From a woman? Well, I thought it was cigars, or a blue diamond,

or a portrait of some old swell whom you had made out to be an ancestor of mine, or —"

"I would advise you not to be funny on the subject until you've heard it explained, Lord Caterham," said Mr. Bowker grimly. "I scarcely imagine you'll find it so humorous before I'm done."

"Sha'n't I? Well, at all events, give me the chance of hearing," said Lionel. He was in a splendid temper. He had come back, after a pleasant run with Algy Barford, to enjoy all the advantages of his new position. On the previous night he and his mother had had a long talk about Miss Maurice — this heiress whom he was to captivate so easily. The world lay straight and bright before him, and he could spare a few minutes to this old fellow — who was either a lunatic or a swindler — for his own amusement.

"I come to you, Lord Caterham, from a woman who claims to be your wife."

In an instant the colour died out of Lionel's face; his brows were knit, and his mouth set and rigid. "O, ho!" said he through his clenched teeth, after a moment's pause; "you do, do you? You come to me from *that* woman? That's your line of country, is it? O yes — I guessed wrong about you, certainly — you don't look a bit like a bully!"

"A bully!" echoed William Bowker, looking very white.

"A bully!" repeated Lionel — "the woman's father, brother, former husband — any thing that will give you a claim to put in an appearance for her. And now look here. This game won't do with me

— I'm up to it; so you had better drop it at once, and get out."

Old Bowker waited for a minute with set teeth and clenched fists, all the gray hair round his mouth bristling with fury. Only for a minute. Then he resumed the seat which he had quitted, and said,

"I'm not quite so certain of myself nowadays, as I've been a long time out of practice; but it strikes me that during your long career of gentlemanly vice, my Lord Caterham, you never were nearer getting a sound drubbing than you have been within the last five minutes. However, let that pass. You have been good enough to accuse me of being a bully, by which term I imagine you mean a man sent here by the unfortunate lady of whom we have spoken to assert her rights. I may as well start by telling you that she is utterly ignorant of my intention to call on you."

"Of course; — O yes, of course. Didn't give you my address, did she?"

"She did not."

"She didn't? O, then you've come on your own hook, being some relation or friend of hers, to see what you could bounce me out of."

"I am no relation of hers. I have not seen her half a dozen times in the course of my life."

"Then what the deuce brings you here?"

"I'll tell you as shortly as I can. When you deserted this woman — not caring what became of her; leaving her to sink or swim as best she might — she slipped from one point of wretchedness to another, until, at the bottom of her descent, she was

discovered by a very old friend of mine perishing of cold and hunger — dying in the streets!"

Lionel, whose face when Bowker commenced speaking had been averted, turned here, and gave a short sharp shudder, fixing his eyes on Bowker as he proceeded.

"Dying in the streets! My friend rescued her from this fate, had her nursed and attended, and finally — ignorant of the chief fact of her life, though she had confided to him a certain portion of her story — fell so desperately in love with her as to ask her to become his wife."

"To become his wife!" cried Lionel; "and she consented?"

"She did."

"And they were married?"

"They were. I was present."

"*Bravissimo!*" said Lionel in a low voice. "You've done me a greater service than you think for, Mr. — what's-your-name. She'll never trouble me again."

"Only once more, my lord," said old Bowker solemnly.

"What the devil do you mean, sir?"

"Simply this, my lord. I understand your exclamation of delight at seeing your way legally to rid yourself of this woman, who is now nothing to you but an incumbrance. But you need not fear; you will not even have the trouble of consulting your lawyer in the matter. There is one who breaks up marriage-ties more effectually even than the Divorce Court, and that one is — Death!"

"Death!"

"Death. The woman of whom we have been speaking lies in the jaws of death. Her recovery, according to all human experience, is impossible. Dying, — and knowing herself to be dying, — she wishes to see you."

"To see me!" said Lionel scornfully; "O no, thank you; I won't interfere in the family party. The gentleman who has married her might object to my coming."

"The gentleman who married her in all noble trust and honour, she deserted directly she heard of your return. Overwhelmed by her cruelty, and by the full details of her story, which he heard from your brother, the then Lord Caterham, at the same time, he fell, smitten with an illness from which he is barely recovering. She is in another house far away from his, and on her death-bed she calls for you."

"She may call," said Lionel, after a moment's pause, frowning, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and settling himself back into his chair; "she may call; I shall not go."

"You will not?"

"I will not — why should I?"

"If you can't answer that question for yourself, Lord Caterham, upon my soul I can't for you," said Bowker gruffly. "If you think you owe no reparation to the woman, your wife, whom you left to be rescued by strangers' charity from starvation, I cannot convince you of it: if you decline to accede to her dying request, I cannot enforce it."

"Why does not the — the gentleman who was so desperately in love with her, and whom she — she accepted — why does not he go to her?" said Lionel. He did not care for Margaret himself, but the thought that she had been something to any one else grated upon his pride.

"Ah, my God," said old Bowker, "how willingly would he; but it is not for him she asks — it is for you. You boast of your experience of women, and yet you know so little of them as to expect gratitude of them. Gratitude from a woman — gratitude — and yet, God knows, I ought not to say that — I ought not to say that."

"You seem to have had a singular experience, Mr. Bowker," said Lionel, "and one on which you can scarcely make up your mind. Where is this lady whom you wish me to see?"

"At Sydenham — within an hour's drive."

Lionel rang the bell. "Tell them to get the brougham round," said he to the servant who answered it. "Now, look here, Mr. Bowker; I am going with you thoroughly depending on your having told me the exact truth."

"You may depend on it," said old Bowker simply. And they started together.

That was a strange ride. At starting Lionel lit a cigar, and puffed fiercely out of the window; idly looking at the Parliament-houses and other familiar objects which met his gaze as they drove over Westminster Bridge, the passing populace; the hoardings blazing with placards, the ordinary bustle and turmoil of every-day life. He was angry and savage;

savage with Margaret for the annoyance she had brought upon him, savage with Bowker for having found him out, savage with himself for having allowed himself, in the impulse of a moment, to be betrayed into this expedition. Then, as the houses became fewer, and the open spaces more frequent; as they left behind them the solid blocks of streets and rows and terraces, dull wretched habitations for ninth-rate clerks, solemn old two-storied edifices where the shipping agents and Baltic merchants of a past generation yet lingered in their retirement, frowsy dirty little shops with a plentiful sprinkling of dirtier and frowsier taverns, imbued as was the whole neighbourhood with a not-to-be-explained maritime flavour, — as they slipped by these and came into the broad road fringed by pretty gardens, in which stood trim villas stuccoed and plate-glassed, with the "coach-house of gentility" and every other sign of ease and wealth; then leaving these behind, emerged into country lanes with wide-spreading meadows on either side, green uplands, swelling valleys, brown shorn fields whence the harvest had been carried, — as they passed through all these the cruel thoughts in Lionel's mind softened, and he began to think of the scene to which he was being hastened, and of his own share in bringing about that scene. As he flung away the butt-end of his cigar, there rose in his mind a vision of Margaret as he had first seen her, walking on the Castle Hill at Tenby with some of her young companions, and looking over the low parapet at the boiling sea raging round Katherine's Rock. How lovely she

looked, glowing with youth and health! What a perfectly aristocratic air and *tournure* she had, visible in the careless grace of her hat, the sweeping elegance of her shawl, the fit of her boots and gloves! How completely he had been taken aback by the apparition! how he had raved about her! had never rested until he had obtained an introduction, and — ah, he remembered at that moment distinctly the quivering of her eyelids, the fluttering of her young bosom under its simple gauze, her half hesitating timid speech. That was comparatively a short time ago — and now in what condition was he to find her? He was not all bad, this man — who is? — and the best part of him was awakened now. He crossed his arms, leaned back in the carriage, and was nearer repentance than he had been since his childhood.

And old William Bowker, what was he thinking of? Indeed, he had fallen into his usual day-dream. The comparison between Margaret and his own lost love, made when he first saw her, had always haunted him; and he was then turning in his mind how, if such a complication as they were experiencing at that moment had been possible, it would have affected her and him. From this his thoughts glided to the impending interview, and he wondered whether he had done right in bringing it about. He doubted whether Margaret would have the physical strength to endure it; and even if she had, whether any good — even so far as the arousing even a transient good in his companion — would result from it. As he was pondering upon these

things, Lionel turned quietly upon him and said in a hoarse voice.

"You said she was very ill?"

"Very ill; could hardly be worse — to be alive."

"It's —" and here he seemed to pull himself together, and nerve himself to hear the worst — "it's consumption, I suppose, caught from — damn it all, how my lip trembles! — brought on by — want, and that."

"It originated in rheumatic fever, produced by cold and exposure, resulting in heart-disease and a complication of disorders."

"Has she had proper advice? — the best, I mean, that can be procured?"

"Yes; she has been seen twice by — and —" said Bowker, naming two celebrated physicians, "and her own doctor sees her every day."

"And their opinions agree?"

"They all agree in saying that —"

"Hush," said Lionel, seizing him by the arm; "your face is quite enough. I'd rather not hear it again, please." And he plunged his hands into his pockets, and sunk back shuddering into the corner of the brougham.

Bowker was silent; and they drove on without interchanging a word until William stopped the coachman at a small gate in a high garden-wall. Then Lionel looked up with a strange frightened glance, and asked, "Is this the place?"

"It is," said Bowker; "she has been here for some little time now. You had better let me go in first, I think, and prepare for your coming."

And all Lionel answered was, "As you please," as he shrunk back into his corner again. He was under a totally new experience. For the first time in his life he found himself suffering under a conscience-pang; felt disposed to allow that he had acted badly towards this woman now lying so stricken and so helpless; had a kind of dim hope that she would recover, in order that he might — vaguely, he knew not how — make her atonement. He felt uncomfortable and fidgetty. Bowker had gone, and the sun-blistered damp-stained garden-door had been closed behind him, and Lionel sat gazing at the door, and wondering what was on the other side of it, and what kind of a house it was, and where she was, and who was with her. He never thought he should have felt like this. He had thought of her — half a dozen times — when he was out there; but he knew she was a clever girl, and he always had a notion that she would fall upon her legs, and outgrow that first girlish smite, and settle down comfortably, and all that kind of thing. And so she would now. They were probably a pack of nervous old women about her — like this fellow who had brought him here — and they exaggerated danger, and made mountains of mole-hills. She was ill — he had little doubt of that; but she would get better, and then he'd see what could be done. Gad! it was a wonderful thing to find any woman caring for a fellow so; he might go through life without meeting another; and after all, what the deuce did it matter? He was his own master, wasn't he? and as for money — well, he

should be sure to have plenty some day: things were all altered now, since poor old Arthur's death; and — And at that moment the door opened; and behind William Bowker, who was pale and very grave, Lionel saw the house with all its blinds drawn down. And then he knew that his better resolutions had come too late, and that Margaret was dead.

Yes, she was dead; had died early that morning. On the previous day she had been more than usually restless and uncomfortable, and towards evening had alarmed the nurse — who thought she was asleep, and who herself was dozing — by breaking out into a shrill cry, followed by a deep long-drawn lamentation. Annie Maurice at the sound rushed hastily into the room, and never left it again until all was over. She found Margaret dreadfully excited. She had had a horrible dream, she said — a dream in which she went through all the miseries of her days of penury and starvation, with the added horror of feeling that they were a just punishment on her for her ingratitude to Geoffrey Ludlow. When she was a little quieted, she motioned Annie to sit by her; and holding her hand, asked her news of Geoffrey. Annie started, for this was the first time that, in her calm senses, Margaret had mentioned him. In her long ravings of delirium his name was constantly on her lips, always coupled with some terms of pity and self-scornful compassion; but hitherto, during her brief intervals of reason, she had talked only of Lionel, and of her earnest desire to see and speak

to him once again. So Annie, pleased and astonished, said,

"He is getting better, Margaret; much better, we trust."

"Getting better! Has he been ill, then?"

"He has been very ill — so ill that we at one time feared for his life. But he is out of danger now, thank God."

"Thank God!" repeated Margaret. "I am grateful indeed that his death is not to be charged to my account; that would have been but a bad return for his preservation of my life; and if he had died, I know his death would have been occasioned by my wickedness. Tell me, Miss Maurice — Annie — tell me, has he ever mentioned my name?"

"Ah, Margaret," said Annie, her eyes filling with tears, "his talk is only of you."

"Is it?" said Margaret, with flushing cheeks and brightening eyes; "is it? That's good to hear — O how good! And tell me, Annie — he knows I shall not trouble him long — has he, has he forgiven me?"

"Not that alone," said Annie quietly. "Only yesterday he said, with tears in his eyes, how he loved you still."

There was silence for a moment, as Margaret covered her eyes with her hands. Then, raising her head, in a voice choked with sobs she said, with a blinding rush of tears, "O Annie, Annie, I can't be *all* bad, or I should never have won the love of that brave, true-hearted man."

She spoke but little after this; and Lionel's name

never passed her lips — she seemed to have forgotten all about him and her desire to see him. From time to time she mentioned Geoffrey — no longer, as in her delirium, with pity, but with a kind of reverential fondness, as one speaks of the dead. As the night deepened, she became restless again, tossing to and fro, and muttering to herself; and bending down, Annie heard her, as she had often heard her before, engaged in deep and fervent prayer. Then she slept; and, worn out with watching, Annie slept also.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when Annie felt her arm touched; and at once unclosing her eyes, saw Margaret striving to raise herself on her elbow. There was a bright weird look in her face that was unmistakable.

"It's coming, Annie," she said, in short thick gasps; "it's coming, dear — the rest, the peace, the home! I don't fear it, Annie. I've — I've had that one line running in my brain, 'What though my lamp was lighted late, there's One will let me in.' I trust in His mercy, Annie, who pardoned Magdalen; and — God bless you, dear; God in His goodness reward you for all your love and care of me; and say to Geoffrey that I blessed him too, and that I thanked him for all his — your hand, Annie — so bless you both! — lighted late, there's One will —"

And the wanderer was at rest.

CHAPTER X.

After the Wreck.

They looked to Bowker to break the news to Geoffrey; at least so Charley Potts said, after a hurried conference with Til and her mother, at which Annie Maurice, overwhelmed by the reaction from excessive excitement, had not been present. They looked to Bowker to perform this sad duty — to tell Geoffrey Ludlow that the prize which had been so long in coming, and which he had held in his arms for so short a time, was snatched from him for ever. "For ever," said old William: "that's it. He bore up wonderfully, so long as he thought there was any chance of seeing her again. He hoped against hope, and strove against what he knew to be right and just, and would have made any sacrifice — ay, to the extent of bowing his head to his own shame, and taking her back to his home and his heart. If she had recovered; and even if she would have shown herself willing to come back — which she never would — I could have faced Geoff, and told him what his duty was, and fought it out with him to the last. It would have rather done me good, such a turn as that; but I can't bear this job; — I can't bear to see my old friend, to have to tell him that it's all over, that the light of his life has died out, that — Upon my soul," said old William energetically, "I think they might have got some

one else to do this. And yet I don't know," said he, after a moment's pause: "the women couldn't be expected to do it. As for Charley, he'd have bungled it, safe. No, I'll go and do it myself; but I'll wait till to-morrow, I think: there's no good adding another day's anguish to the dear fellow's life."

This was on the second day after Margaret's death, and Bowker yet postponed the execution of his task. On the third day, however, he set out for Elm Lodge, and found Geoffrey in the dining-room. The servant who admitted Mr. Bowker said, in reply to his inquiry, that "master was better certainly, but poor and peaky; did not take much notice of what went on, and were quite off his food." Geoffrey's looks certainly bore out the handmaiden's account. His cheeks were thin and hollow; there were great circles round his eyes; his flesh was tight and yellow; his hands so fallen away that they looked like mere anatomical preparations. He looked up as Bowker entered, and the ghost of his old smile hovered round his lips.

"So you've come at last, William, after failing in your troth these three days, eh?" said he. "What kept you, old friend?"

Bowker was not prepared for any questions. He had gone through all this scene in his mind more than once; but in his rehearsal it was always he who commenced the subject; and this order not being followed, he was rather taken aback.

"I have been particularly engaged," he said. "You know, Geoff, that I should not have missed coming to you otherwise; but — it was impossible."

"Was it?" said Geoffrey, raising his head quietly, and steadfastly regarding him with his bright eyes; "was it on my business that you were engaged?"

"It was," said Bowker. He knew at that moment that his friend had guessed the truth.

"Then," said Geoffrey, "Margaret is dead!" He said it without altering the inflection of his voice, without removing his eyes from his friend's face. Scarcely inquiringly he said it, apparently convinced of the fact; and he took Bowker's silence for an affirmative, and rose and walked towards the window, supporting himself by the wall as he went. Bowker left him there by himself for a few minutes, and then, going up to him and laying his hand affectionately on his shoulder, said, "Geoff!"

Geoff's head was averted, but his hand sought Bowker's, and pressed it warmly.

"Geoff, dear old Geoff, — my old friend of many happy years, — you must bear up in this hour of trial. Think of it, dear old fellow. God knows, I'm one of the worst in the world to preach content and submission, and all that, but think of it: it is the — you know I wouldn't hurt your feelings, Geoff — the best thing that, under all the circumstances, could have occurred."

"I've lost her, William — lost her whom I loved better than my heart's blood, whom I so prized and cherished and worshipped — lost her for ever — ah, my God, for ever!" And the strong man writhed in his agony, and burying his head in his arms, burst into tears.

"But, Geoff," said old Bowker, with a great gulp, "you could never have been any thing to her again; you have nothing to reproach yourself with in your conduct to her. It was her misfortune, poor soul, that she did not value you as she should have done; and yet before she died she spoke very, very affectionately of you, and your name was the last on her lips."

"Tell me about that, William," said Geoffrey, raising his head; "tell me what she said about me." He was comparatively calm even then, and sat quite quietly to listen to the details which Bowker had heard from Annie Maurice, and which he now poured into Geoff's eager ears. When he had finished, Geoff thanked him, and said he felt much easier and more relieved than he had been for some days past, but that he was tired out, and would ask Bowker to excuse him then, and by all means to come the next day. Honest William, glad to have accomplished his mission under such apparently favourable circumstances, and with so little of a "scene," took his leave.

But the next day, when he arrived at Elm Lodge, he found Dr. Brandram's gig at the gate, and on entering the house was met by Dr. Brandram himself in the hall. "And a very fortunate man I esteem myself in meeting you, my dear Mr. Boucher — beg pardon, Bowker! Boucher — name of old friend of mine in Norfolk — very fortunate indeed. Let's step into the dining-room, eh? — no need to stand in the draught, eh? You see I speak without the least professional feeling — ha, ha." And the little doctor laughed, but very softly. "Now look here,

my dear sir," he continued; "our friend upstairs — I advised his remaining upstairs to-day — this *won't* do, my dear sir — this *won't* do."

"I know it, doctor, almost as well as you," said old William gruffly; "but what I don't know, and what I suppose you do, is — what will?"

"Change my dear sir — thorough and entire change; not merely of air and scene, but of thought, life, habits, surroundings. He has a splendid constitution, our friend; but if he remains much longer in this cage, from which all the — all the joys have flown — he'll beat himself to death against the bars." This was a favourite simile with Dr. Brandram; and after he had uttered it he leant back, as was his wont, and balanced himself on his heels, and looked up into the eyes of his interlocutor to see its effect. On this occasion he was not much gratified, for old Bowker had not troubled himself about the poetical setting, but was thinking over the sense of the doctor's remark.

"Change," he repeated, "thorough change; have you told him that yourself, doctor?"

"Fifty times, my dear sir; repeated it with all the weight of medical authority."

"And what does he say?"

"Always the same thing — that his duty keeps him here. He's an extraordinary man, our friend, a most estimable man; but it would be an excellent thing for him, — in fact, make all the difference in the length of his life, — if his duty would take him abroad for six months."

"It shall," said old Bowker, putting on his hat,

and driving it hard down on his head. "Leave that to me. I'll take care of that." And with these words he nodded at the doctor and departed, leaving the little medico more astonished at the "odd ways" of artists than ever.

When Mr. Bowker had once made up his mind to carry any thing out, he never rested until it was achieved; so that on quitting Elm Lodge he at once made his way to Mr. Stompff's "gallery of modern masters," which he entered, greatly to the surprise of the proprietor, who was hovering about the room like a great spider on the watch for flies. There had never been any thing like cordiality between the great *entrepreneur* and the rough old artist; and the former opened his eyes to their widest extent, and pulled his whisker through his teeth, as he bowed somewhat sarcastically and said, "This is an honour, and no flies!" But before his visitor left, Mr. Stompff had occasion to rub his eyes very hard with a bright silk pocket-handkerchief, and to resort to a cupboard under the desk on which the catalogues stood, whence he produced a tapering flask, from which he and Mr. Bowker refreshed themselves —his last words being, as Mr. Bowker took his departure, "You leave it to me, old feller—you leave it to me."

Carrying out apparently the arrangement herein entered upon, the next day the great Mr. Stompff's brougham stopped at Elm Lodge, and the great Mr. Stompff himself descended therefrom, exhibiting far less than his usual self-sufficiency, swagger, and noise. To the servant who opened the door in an-

swer to his modest ring he gave a note which he had prepared; and Geoffrey coming down into the dining-room found him waiting there, apparently deep in a photographic album. He rose, as the door opened, and caught Geoffrey warmly by the hand.

"How are you, Ludlow? how are you, my dear fellow? It must have been pressing business that brought me here just now, worrying you when you're only just recovered from your illness, my boy; pressing business, you may take your oath of that." And all the time Mr. Stompff held Geoffrey's hand between his own, and looked into his eyes with a wavering unsettled glance.

"I'm better, thank you, Mr. Stompff, much better; so much better that I hope soon to be at work again," said Geoff nervously.

"That's right; that's the best hearing possible. Nothing like getting back to work to set a man straight and bring him to his bearings."

"You were getting nervous about the 'Esplanade,'" said Geoff with a sickly smile — "as well indeed you might, for it's been a long time about. But you need not be frightened about that; I've managed to finish it."

"Have you?" said Stompff, very dry and husky in the throat.

"Yes; if you'll step into the studio, I'll show it you." They went down the little steps which Margaret had traversed so oft; and Geoffrey, as he pulled the big easel round into the light, said, "It's not quite what I wished. I — circumstances, you know, were against me — and but — it can be altered, you know; altered in any manner you wish."

"Altered be — hanged!" cried Stompff, very nearly relapsing into the vernacular; "altered!" he repeated, gazing at it with delight; now approaching closely to the canvas, now stepping away and looking at it under the shade of his hand; "why, that's first chop, that is. You've done it up brown! You've made a reg'ler ten-strike, as the Yankees say. Altered! I wouldn't have a brush laid upon that for a fifty-pun' note. By George, Ludlow, well or ill, you lick the lot in your own line. There's none of 'em can touch you, d'ye hear? Altered! — damme, it's splendid."

"I'm very glad you like it," said Geoff wearily, "very glad; more especially as it may be a long time before I paint again."

"What's that you say?" said Mr. Stompff, turning upon him sharply. "What's that you say?" he repeated in a gentler tone, laying his hand softly upon Geoffrey Ludlow's shoulder — "a long time before you paint again? Why, nonsense, my good fellow; you don't know what nonsense you're talking."

"No nonsense, Mr. Stompff, but plain, honest, simple fact. I seem to have lost all zest for my art; my spirit is broken, and —"

"Of course, my good fellow; I understand all that well enough; too much England, — that's what it is. Home of the free, and ruling the waves, and all that. Pickles! Capital place to sell pictures; deuced bad place to paint 'em. Now look here. You've been good enough to say more than once that I've been you're friend, eh? Not that I've ever done more than give a good price for good work, though that's more than some people do — some

people, eh? we know who — never mind. Now I want you to do *me* a turn, and I am sure you will."

Geoffrey bowed his head and said, "So long as you don't require a picture from me —"

"Picture! O no; of course not. A steam engine, or a hansom cab, or a stilton cheese — that's what I look for from you naturally, isn't it? Ludlow, my dear fellow, how can you talk such stuff? Now listen. The British public, sir, has had a sickener of British subjects. Little Dabb and his crew have pretty nearly used up all the sentimental domesticity; and we've had such a lot of fancy fairs, and Hyde Parks, and noble volunteers, and archery fêtes, and gals playing at croky, that the B. P. won't stand it any longer. There'll be a reaction, you'll see; and the 'Cademy will be choke full of Charles the Seconds, and Nell Gwynns, and coves in wigs, and women in powder and patches, and all that business, just because the modern every-day gaff has been done to death. I shall have to give in to this; and I shall give in of course. There's lots of coves can do that trick for me well enough to sell. But I look for more from you; — and this is what I propose. You go straight away out of this; where, I don't care — so long as you remain away a year or so, and keep your eyes about you. You'll work hard enough, — I don't fear that; and whatever you do, send it home to me and I'll take it. Lor' bless you, there's rigs that the B. P. knows nothing about, and that would make stunnin' subjects for you — a *table-d'hôte* on the Rhine, a students' *kneipe* at Heidelberg, a *schützenfest* in Switzerland; and then you've never been to Italy yet, and though that game's been

worked pretty often, yet any thing Italian from you would sell like mad." He paused for a moment and looked up at Geoffrey, whose eyes were fixed intently on him, and who seemed eager and excited.

"It's all one to me," said he; "I scarcely know what to say; it's very kind of you. I know you mean it well; but do you think I can do it? Do you really think so?"

"Think so! I know so," said Mr. Stompff. "See here! I never take up a thing of this sort without carrying it through. We said five hundred for the 'Esplanade,' didn't we? You've had three on account — that's right! Now here's the other two; and if you're as well pleased with the bargain as me, no knife shall cut our love in two, as the song says. Now you must leave this money behind for the old lady and the little 'un, and that nice sister of yours — O yes, by the way, what makes Charley Potts paint her head in all his pictures, and why don't he sell to me instead of Caniche? — and here's a hundred in circular notes. I went round to my bank and got 'em this morning on purpose for you to go abroad with. When they're done, you know where to send for some more."

"You are very kind, Mr. Stompff, but —"

"No, I ain't. I'm a man of business, I am; and there ain't many as is very fond of me. But I know what the B. P. wants, and I know a good fellow when I see one; and when I do see one, I don't often let him slide. I ain't a polished sort of cove," said Mr. Stompff reflectively; "I leave that to Caniche, with his paw-paw bowins and scrapins; but I ain't quite so black as some of the artists paint

me. However, this is a matter of business that I'm rather eager about; and I should be glad to know if I may look upon it as settled."

"Look here, Mr. Stompff," said Geoffrey Ludlow, turning to his companion, and speaking in an earnest voice; "you have behaved generously to me, and you deserve that I should speak frankly with you. I should immensely like to get away from this place for a while, to shake off the memory of all that has passed within the last few months — so far as it is possible for me to shake it off — to get into new scenes, and to receive fresh impressions. But I very much doubt whether I shall be able to undertake what you wish. I feel as if all the little power I ever had were gone; as if my brain were as barren to conceive as I know my hand is impotent to execute; I feel —"

"I know," interrupted Mr. Stompff; "regularly sewed up; feel as if you'd like somebody to unscrew your head, take your brains out and clean 'em, and then put 'em back; feel as if you didn't care for the world, and would like to try the hermit dodge and eat roots and drink water, and cut society, eh? Ah, I've felt like that sometimes; and then I've heard of some pictures that was comin' to the hammer, and I've just looked in at Christie's, and, Lord, as soon as I heard the lots a-goin' up, and felt myself reg'ler in the swing of competition, I've given up all them foolish notions, and gone home and enjoyed a roast fowl and a glass of sham and Mrs. S.'s comp'ny, like a Christian! And so will you, Ludlow, my boy; you'll pull through, I'll pound it. You work just when you feel inclined, and draw upon me

when you want the ready; I'll stand the racket, never fear."

The conspiracy between Mr. Stompff and old William Bowker had been carried out minutely in detail; one of the points insisted on being that, the position once carried, Geoff should have no time for retreat. Accordingly, while Mr. Stompff was proceeding to Elm Lodge, Mr. Bowker was indoctrinating the ladies (whom he knew he should find at Sydenham) as to the tenour of their advice; and scarcely had Mr. Stompff quitted Geoffrey when Mr. Bowker was announced. To his old friend, Geoffrey, now in a very excited state, told the whole story of Stompff's visit and of the proposition which he had made; and old William — whom no one would have given credit for possessing such control over his face — sat looking on with the greatest apparent interest. When Geoffrey came to an end of his narration, and asked his friend whether he had done right in partially acceding to what had been offered him, or whether — it was not too late — he should retract, Mr. Bowker was extremely vehement — more so than he had ever known himself to be — in insisting that it was the very best thing that could possibly have happened. When Mrs. Ludlow and Til returned, they unhesitatingly pronounced the same opinion; and so Geoff's departure was decided on.

He had a great deal to attend to before he could leave; and the mere bustle and activity of business seemed to do him good at once. Mrs. Ludlow was thoroughly happy in preparing his clothes for his journey; Mr. Bowker and Charley Potts were constantly at Elm Lodge, the latter gentleman finding

his assistance usually required by Miss Til; and on the day before that fixed for Geoffrey's departure, Annie Maurice called to take farewell. It was an interview which had been dreaded by both of them, and was as brief as possible. Annie expressed her satisfaction at his having been persuaded to seek change, by which she was sure he would benefit, and extended her hand in "good-bye."

Geoff took her hand, and holding it tenderly in his, said:

"Annie, some day I may be able — I am very far from being able now — to tell you how the knowledge of your kindness to — to one whom I have lost — has sustained me under my bitter sorrow. God bless you, my more than sister! God bless you, my good angel!" And Geoffrey touched her forehead with his lips, and hurried from the room.

The authorities at the South-Eastern terminus at London Bridge thought that some distinguished exile must be about returning to France that night, there were so many curiously-hatted and bearded gentlemen gathered round the mail-train. But they were only some of our old friends of the Titians come to say "God-speed" to Geoffrey Ludlow, whose departure had been made known to them by Mr. Stompff. That worthy was there in great force, and old Bowker, and Charley Potts, and little Dabb, and old Tom Wrigley, and many others; and as the train wound out of the station, bearing Geoff along with it, there were rising tears and swelling knots in eyes and throats that were very unused to such manifestations of weakness.

CHAPTER XI.

Land at Last.

The calm had come after the storm; the great, hurrying, thundering waves had stilled into silence, and lay quiet over the shattered wreck of home, and happiness, and hope. The winter rain had beaten upon the pretty house, and the light snow had fallen and lain a while, and had then melted away upon the garden ground and the smooth green turf, within the walls which had made a prison to the restless spirit of Margaret, even as the rain had beaten and the snow had fallen upon her grave in Norwood Cemetery. Now the spring odours were abroad in the air, and the trees were breaking into leaf, and Elm Lodge was looking the very perfection of tranquillity, of well-ordered, tasteful comfort and domesticity; an appearance in which there was all the sadness of a great contrast, a terrible retrospect, and an irremediable loss. Yet this appearance was not altogether deceptive; for within the house which had witnessed so much misery, peace and resignation now reigned. Mrs. Ludlow's unacknowledged desire was now realised; she was the mistress of her son's house, of all the modest splendour which had come with poor Geoff's improved fortunes; she ruled now where she had been subordinate before, and in the nursery, where at best she had only enjoyed toleration, she found herself supreme. To be sure, the

great element of enjoyment, her son's presence, was wanting; but she knew that Geoffrey was doing the best thing in his power to do, was taking the most effectual means for the establishment of his health and the alleviation of his sorrow; and the old lady — on whom the supineness which comes with years, and which takes the edge off the sword of grief and the bitterness out of its cup, was beginning to steal — was satisfied. Much that had occurred was only imperfectly known to her; and indeed she would have been unfitted, by the safe routine and happy inexperience of evil passions which had marked her own life, to understand the storm and conflict which had raged around her. That her son's beautiful wife had been utterly unworthy of him, and that she had deceived and left him, Mrs. Ludlow knew; but Margaret's death had come so soon to terminate the terrible and mysterious dilemma in which her conduct had placed them all, that it had imposed upon them the silence of compassion, and filled them with the sense of merciful relief; so that by mutual consent her name had not been mentioned in the house where she had been mistress for so long. Her son's illness, and the danger of losing him, had impressed Mrs. Ludlow much more vividly than his domestic calamity; and she had settled down with surprising ease and readiness to the routine of life at Elm Lodge.

That routine included a good deal of the society of Mr. Charley Potts; and as Mrs. Ludlow was almost as much attached to that warm-hearted and hot headed gentleman as Miss Til herself, she acquiesced with perfect willingness in the state of affairs which brought him to Elm Lodge with regularity equalled

only by that of the postman. The household was a quiet one; and the simple and unpretending women who walked along the shady paths at Lowbar in their deep-mourning dresses, or played with the little child upon the lawn, furnished but scanty food for the curiosity of the neighbourhood. Popular feeling was indeed somewhat excited on the subject of Charley Potts; but Dr. Brandram — a gallant gentleman in his way — set that matter at rest very quickly by announcing that Charley and Miss Ludlow were engaged, and were shortly to be married — information which was graciously received; as indeed the most distant tidings of a prospective wedding always are received by small communities in which the female element predominates. Dr. Brandram had done Geoffrey good service too, by his half-made, half-withheld communications respecting the beautiful mistress of Elm Lodge, whose disappearance had been so sudden. She had not recovered her confinement so well as he had hoped: the nervous system had been greatly shaken. He had ordered change: a temporary removal from home was frequently of great benefit. Yes, there had been a terrible scene with Mr. Ludlow — that was quite true: the non-medical mind was hard to convince in these matters sometimes; and Mr. Ludlow had been hard to manage. But a quarrel between *them?* — O dear no: quite a mistake. Mrs. Ludlow left home by herself? — O dear no: by her own consent, certainly. She perfectly comprehended the necessity of the change, and was ready to submit; while Ludlow could not be brought to see it — that was all. "I assure you, my dear madam," the doctor would say to each of his female

catechists, "I never had a more interesting patient; and I never pitied a man more than Ludlow when she sank so rapidly and unexpectedly. I really feared for *his* reason then, and of course I sent *him* away immediately. A little change, my dear madam, — a little change in these cases produces a wonderful effect — quite wonderful!"

"But, doctor," the anxious inquirer would probably say, "Mr. Ludlow never saw her again after she was removed, did he?"

"Well, indeed, my dear madam, — you see I am telling professional secrets; but you are not like other women: you are so far above any vulgar curiosity, and I know I may rely so entirely on your discretion, that I make an exception in your case, — they never did meet. You see these cases are so uncertain; and cerebral disease developes itself so rapidly, that before any favourable change took place, the patient sunk."

"Dear me, how very sad! It was at an asylum, I suppose?"

"Well, my dear madam, it was under private care — under the very best circumstances, I assure you; but — you'll excuse me; this is entirely confidential. And now to return to your dear little boy."

So did kind-hearted Dr. Brandram lend his aid to the laying of the ghost of scandal at Elm Lodge; and gradually it became accepted that Mrs. Ludlow had died under the circumstances hinted at by Dr. Brandram.

"It is rather a disadvantage to the dear child, Charley, I fear," sapiently remarked Miss Til to the docile Mr. Potts, as he was attending her on a gardening expedition, holding a basket while she snipped

and weeded, and looking as if pipes and beer had never crossed the path of his knowledge or the disc of his imagination; "people will talk about his mother having died in a lunatic-asylum."

"Suppose they do?" asked Charley in reply. "That sort of thing does not harm a man; and" — here the honest fellow's face darkened and his voice fell — "it is better they should say that than the truth. I think that can always be hidden, Til. The poor woman's death has saved us all much; but it has been the greatest boon to her child; for now no one need ever know, and least of all the child himself, that he has no right to bear his father's name."

"It is well Geoff is not a rich man, with a great estate to leave to an eldest son," said Til, pulling at an obstinate tuft of groundsel, and very anxious to prevent any suspicion that her lover's words had brought tears to her eyes.

"Well," said Charley, with rather a gloomy smile, "I'm not so certain of that, Til: it's a matter of opinion; but I'm clear that it's a good thing he's not a great man — in the 'nob' sense of the word I mean — and that the world can afford to let him alone. Here comes the young shaver — let's go and talk to him." And Charley, secretly pining to get rid of the basket, laid down that obnoxious burden, and went across the grass-plat towards the nurse, just then making her appearance from the house.

"Charley is always right," said Til to herself as she eradicated the last obstinate weed in the flower-bed under inspection, and rejoined Mr. Potts; from which observation it is to be hoped that the fitness of Miss Til for undertaking that most solemn

of human engagements — matrimony — will be fully recognised. There are women who practically apply to their husbands the injunctions of the Church Catechism, in which duty to God is defined; who "believe in, fear, trust, and love" them "with all all their hearts, with all their minds, with all their souls, and with all their strength;" and Matilda Ludlow, though a remarkably sensible girl, and likely enough to estimate other people at their precise value, was rapidly being reduced to this state of mind about Charley, who was at all events much less unworthy than most male objects of female devoteeism.

Mrs. Ludlow and her daughter heard pretty regularly from Geoff. Of course his letters were unsatisfactory; men's letters always are, except they be love-letters, when their meaning is tempered by their exclusiveness. He was eager for news of the child; but he never referred to the past in any other respect, and he said little in anticipation of the future. He described his travels, reported the state of his health, and expressed his anxiety for his mother's comfort; and that was about the sum-total of these literary productions, which no doubt were highly penitential performances to poor Geoffrey.

Spring was well advanced when Charley and Til began to discuss the propriety of naming a time for their marriage. The house at Brompton was still "on their hands," as Mrs. Ludlow was fond of saying, while in her secret heart she would have deeply regretted the turning-up of an eligible tenant; for who could answer for the habits and manners of strangers, or tell what damage her sacred furniture might receive? Charley proposed to Til that they

should become her mother's tenants, and urged that young lady to consent to a speedy marriage, from the most laudable economic principles, on the ground that under present circumstances he was idling dreadfully, but that he confidently expected that marriage would "settle his mind." The recent date of the family calamity Charley could not be brought to regard as a reasonable obstacle to his wishes.

"Look here, Til," he said; "it isn't as if we were swells, you know, with our names, ages, and weights in the *Morning Post*, and our addresses in the *Red Book*. What need we care, if Geoff don't mind? — and he won't, God bless him! — the happier we are, the sooner he'll cease to be miserable; and who's to know or to care whether it's so many months sooner or later after that poor woman's death? Besides, consider this, Til; if we wait until Geoff comes home, a wedding and all that won't be pleasant for him: will it, now? Painful associations you know, and all that. I really think, for Geoff's sake, we had better get it over."

"Do you indeed, Master Charley?" said Til, with a smile full of pert drollery, which rendered her exasperatingly pretty. "How wonderfully considerate you are of Geoff; and how marvellously polite to describe marrying me as 'getting it over'! No, no, Charley," she continued, seriously; "it cannot be. I could not leave mamma to the responsibility of the house and the child — at least not yet. Don't ask me; it would not be right towards Geoff, or fair to my mother. You must wait, sir."

And the crestfallen Charley knew that he must wait, and acquiesced with a very bad grace; not but

that Miss Til would have been horribly vexed had it been better.

An unexpected auxiliary was about this time being driven by fate towards Charley Potts in the person of Annie Maurice. She had been constant and regular in her visits to Elm Lodge, affectionate and respectful in her demeanour to Mrs. Ludlow, and sisterly in her confidence towards Til. The hour that had united the two girls in a tie of common responsibility towards Geoff and Margaret had witnessed the formation of a strong and lasting friendship; and though Annie's superior refinement and higher education raised her above the level of Matilda Ludlow, she was not more than her equal in true womanly worth. They passed many happy hours together in converse which had now become cheerful, and their companionship was strengthened by the bond of their common interest in Til's absent brother. Miss Ludlow, perhaps, did an unfair proportion of the talking on these occasions; for she was of the gushing order of girls, though she did not border even remotely on silliness. By common consent they did not speak of Margaret, and Til had never known Arthur; so that Annie rarely talked of him, always sacredly loved and remembered in her faithful heart, preserved as her friend and monitor—dead, yet speaking. Annie had been more silent than usual lately, and had looked sad and troubled; and it chanced that on the day following that which witnessed Charley's luckless proposition, Miss Maurice arrived at Elm Lodge at an earlier hour than usual; and having gained a private audience of Til, made to her a somewhat startling revelation.

The conference between the girls lasted long, and its object took Til completely by surprise. Annie Maurice had resolved upon leaving Lord Beauport's house, and she had come to ask Mrs. Ludlow to receive her. She told Til her reasons, simply, honestly, and plainly.

"I cannot live in the house with Lionel Brakespere," she said; "and I have no friends but you. Geoffrey and I were always friends, and my dear Arthur trusted him, and knew he would befriend me. I am sure if he were living now, he would counsel me to do what I am doing. I have often thought if he had had any idea that the end was so near, he would have told me, if any difficulty came in my way, to apply for aid to Geoffrey, and I am clear that I am doing right now. I have no friends, Til, though I am rich," Annie repeated, with a more bitter smile than had ever flitted over her bright face in former days; "and I have no 'position' to keep up. I cannot go and live in a big house by myself, or in a small one either, for that matter, and I want your mother to let me come and live with her while Geoffrey is away."

Til hesitated before she replied. She saw difficulties in the way of such an arrangement which Annie did not; difficulties arising from the difference in the social position of the friends Annie wished to leave, and those she wished to come to.

"I am sure, as far as we are concerned, every thing might be as you wish," she said; "but—Lady Beauport might not think it quite the thing."

"Lady Beauport knows I will not remain in her house, Til; and she will soon see as plainly as

I do that it is well I should not. The choice is between me and her son, and the selection is not difficult. Lionel Brakespere (I cannot call him by Arthur's familiar name) and I are not on speaking terms. He knows that I am acquainted with his crimes; not only those known to his family, but those which he thought death had assisted him to hide. I might have concealed my knowledge from him, had he not dared to insult me by an odious pretence of admiration, which I resented with all my heart and soul. A few words made him understand that the safest course he could pursue was to abandon such a pretence, and the revelation filled him with such wrath and hatred as only such a nature could feel. Why he has adopted a line of behaviour which can only be described as downright savage rudeness — so evidently intended to drive me out of the house, that Lord and Lady Beauport themselves see it in that light — I am unable to comprehend. I have sometimes fancied that he and his mother have quarrelled on the matter; but if so, he has had the best of it. However, there is no use in discussing it, Til; my home is broken up and gone from me; and if your mother will not take me under her charge until Geoffrey comes home, and advises me for the future, I must only set up somewhere with a companion and a cat."

Annie smiled, but very sadly; then she continued:

"And now, Til, I'll tell you how we will manage. First, we will get the mother's leave, and I will invite myself on a visit here, to act as your bridesmaid, you see, and —"

"Charley has been talking to you, Annie!" exclaimed Miss Til, starting up in mingled indignation and amusement; "I see it all now — you have been playing into each other's hands."

"No, indeed; Charley never said a word to me about it," replied Annie seriously; "though I am sure if he had, I should have done any thing he asked; but, Til, do let us be in earnest, — I am serious in this. I don't want to make a scandal and a misery of this business of my removal from Lord Beauport's; and if I can come here to be your bridesmaid, in a quiet way, and remain with your mother when you have left her, it will seem a natural sort of arrangement, and I shall very soon, heiress though I am, drop out of the memory of the set in which I have lately moved. I am sure Geoffrey will be pleased; and you know that dear little Arthur is quite fond of me already."

It is unnecessary to report the conversation between the two girls in fuller detail. Miss Maurice carried her point; the consent of Mrs. Ludlow to the proposed arrangement was easily gained; and one day the fine carriage with the fine coronets, which had excited the admiration of the neighbourhood when Miss Maurice paid her first visit to Geoffrey Ludlow's bride, deposited that young lady and her maid at Elm Lodge. A few days later a more modest equipage bore away Mr. and Mrs. Potts on the first stage of their journey of life.

"And so, my dear Annie," wrote Geoffrey to his ex-pupil, "you are established in the quiet house in which I dreamed dreams once on a time. I continue the children's phrase, and say 'a long time ago.'

I am glad to think of you there with my mother and my poor little child. If you were any one but Annie Maurice, I might fear that you would weary of the confined sphere to which you have gone; but, then, it is because you *are* Annie Maurice that you are there. Sometimes I wonder whether I shall ever see the place again, which, if ever I do see it, I must look upon with such altered eyes. God knows: it will be long first — for I am wofully weak still. But enough of me. My picture goes on splendidly. When it is finished and sent home to Stompff, I shall start for Egypt. I suppose many a one before me has tried to find the waters of Lethe between the banks of Nile."

Charley Potts and Til were comfortably settled in the house at Brompton, where Til guarded the household gods with pious care, and made Charley uncommonly comfortable and abnormally orderly. Mrs. Ludlow and her young guest led a tranquil life at Elm Lodge. Annie devoted herself to the old lady and the child with a skilful tenderness partly natural to her and partly acquired by the experiences of her life in her rural home, and within the scene of Caterham's lengthened and patient suffering. The child loved her and throve under her charge; and the old lady seemed to find her "cross" considerably less troublesome within the influence of Annie's tranquil cheerfulness, strong sense, and accommodating disposition. The neighbourhood had taken to calling vigorously and pertinaciously on Mrs. Ludlow and Miss Maurice. It approved highly of those ladies; for the younger was very pleasant, not alarm-

ingly beautiful, reputed to be very rich, and acknowledged not to "give herself airs;" while the elder was intensely respectable — after the fashion dear to the heart of Lowbar; and both went to church with scrupulous regularity. Dr. Brandram was even more cordial in his appreciation of Annie than he had been in his admiration of Margaret; and the star of Elm Lodge was quite in the ascendant. A few of the members of the great world whom she had met in the celestial sphere of St. Barnabas Square found Annie out even at Elm Lodge, and the apparition of other coronets than that of the Beauports was not unknown in the salubrious suburb. Lady Beauport visited Miss Maurice but rarely, and her advent seldom gave Annie pleasure. The girl's affectionate and generous heart was pained by the alteration which she marked more and more distinctly each time that she saw the cold and haughty Countess, on whose face care was fast making marks which time had failed to impress.

Sometimes she would be almost silent during her short visits, on which occasions Mrs. Ludlow was wont to disappear as soon as possible; sometimes she would find querulous fault with Annie — with her appearance and her dress, and her "throwing herself away." Sometimes Annie felt that she was endeavouring to turn the conversation in the direction of Lionel; but that she invariably resisted. It chanced one day, however, that she could not succeed in preventing Lady Beauport from talking of him. Time had travelled on since Annie had taken up her abode at Elm Lodge, and the summer was waning; the legislative labours of the Houses had come to an end,

and Lord and Lady Beauport were about to leave town. This time the Countess had come to say good-bye to Annie, whom she found engaged in preparations for a general flitting of the Elm-Lodge household to the seaside for the autumn. Annie was in blooming health, and her usual agreeable spirits — a strong contrast to the faded, jaded, cross-looking woman, who said to her complainingly,

"Really, Annie, I think you might have come with us, and left your friends here to find their autumnal amusements for themselves; you know how much Lord Beauport and I wished it."

"Yes," said Annie gently, "I know you are both very kind; but it cannot be. You saw that yourself, dear Lady Beauport, and consented to my entering on so different a life. You see I could not combine the two; and I have new duties now —"

"Nonsense, Annie!" said Lady Beauport angrily. "You will not come because of Lionel, — that is the truth. Well, he is not to be at home at all; he is going away to a number of places: he likes any place better than home, I think. I cannot understand why you and he should disagree so much; but if it must be so, I suppose it must. However, you will not meet him now." And Lady Beauport actually condescended to reiterate her request; but she had no success. Annie had resolutely broken with the old life, which had never suited her fresh, genial, simple tastes; and she was determined not to renew the tie. She knew that she was not in any true sense necessary to Lady Beauport's happiness; she was not ungrateful for such kindness as she had received; but she was a sensible girl, and she made no mistake

about her own value, and the true direction in which her duty, her vocation lay. So she steadily declined; but so gently that no offence was taken; and made inquiry for Lord Beauport. The worried expression which had gradually marred the highbred repose of Lady Beauport's face increased as she replied, and there was a kind of involuntary confidence in her manner which struck Annie with a new and painful surprise. Lord Beauport was well, she said; but he was not in good spirits. Things seemed to be wrong with them somehow and out of joint. Then the elder lady, seeing in the face of her young listener such true sympathy, thawed suddenly from her habitual proud reserve, and poured out the bitterness of her disappointment and vain regret. There was a tone of reproach against Annie mingled with her complaint, which the girl pityingly passed over. If Annie had but liked Lionel; if she would but have tried to attract him, and keep him at home, all might have been well: but Annie had imbibed poor Arthur's prejudices; and surely never were parents so unfortunate as she and the Earl in the mutual dislike which existed between their children. Lady Beauport did not want to justify Lionel entirely — of course not: but she thought he might have had a better chance given him in the first instance. Now he had greatly deteriorated — she saw that: she could not deny it; and her "granted prayer" for his return had not brought her happiness.

Annie listened to all this with a swelling heart. A vision floated before her tearful eyes of the lost son, who had been so little loved, so lightly prized; whose place the brother preferred before him had

taken and disgraced; and a terrible sense of retribution came into her mind. Too late the father and mother were learning how true his judgment had been, and how valuable his silent influence. Time could only engrave that lesson more and more deeply on their hearts; experience could only embitter it — its sting was never to be withdrawn. They had chosen between the two, and their choice, like Esau's, was "profane." Lady Beauport spoke more and more bitterly as she proceeded. The softening touch of grief was not upon her — only the rankling of disappointment and mortification; only the sting of a son's ingratitude, of discovering that in return for the sacrifice of principle, self-respect, and dignity to which she had consented for Lionel's sake, she had not received even the poor return of a semblance of affection or consideration.

The hardness of Lionel's nature was shown in every thing his mother said of him — the utter want of feeling, the deadness of soul. Annie felt very sad as she listened to Lady Beauport's melancholy account of the life they had fallen into at the great house. She was oppressed by the sense of the strangeness of the events which had befallen, and in which the Countess had, all unconsciously, so deep an interest. It was very sad and strange to remember that she was detailing the conduct of the man whose baseness had enabled Margaret to lay Geoffrey's life in ruins under Geoffrey's own roof. It was terrible to Annie to feel that in her knowledge there was a secret which might so easily have been divulged at any moment, and which would have afflicted the vexed and mortified woman before her more deeply than

any thing that had occurred. Lady Beauport was not tender-hearted; but she was a high-minded gentle woman, and would have been shamed and stricken to the soul had she discovered the baseness of her son in this particular instance. She had fondly flattered herself into a belief that the crime which had been so inadequately punished was only a folly; but there was no possibility of such a reading of this one, and Annie was glad to think that at least the pang of this knowledge was spared to Lady Beauport. She could say nothing to comfort her. In her inmost heart she had an uneasy, unexplained sense that it was all the just retribution for the conduct of Arthur's parents towards him, and hopelessness for the future of a family of which Lionel formed a member took possession of her.

"He is so disagreeable, so selfish, Annie," continued Lady Beauport, "and O so slangy; and you know how his father hates that sort of thing."

"It is better that he should be away, then, for a little," said Annie, trying to be soothing, and failing lamentably.

"Well, perhaps it is," said Lady Beauport; "and yet that seems hard too, when I longed so much for his return, and when now he has every thing he wants. Of course, when he was only a second son, he had excuses for discontent; but now he has none, and yet he is never satisfied. I sometimes think he is ill at ease, and fancies people are thinking about the past, who don't even know any thing about it, and would not trouble themselves to resent it if they did. But his father does not agree with me, Annie: he will not give Lionel credit for any thing good. I

cannot make out Lord Beauport: he is much more cold and stern towards Lionel than he need be, for he is not so careless and inconsiderate towards his father as he is towards me. He seems to have taken up poor Arthur's notions now, and to judge Lionel as severely as he did. He does not say much; but things are uncomfortable between them, and Lord Beauport is altered in every way. He is silent and dispirited; and do you know, Annie, I think he grieves for Arthur more than he did at first?"

Distress and perplexity were in Lady Beauport's face and voice, and they went to Annie's gentle heart.

"Try not to think so much of it," she said; "circumstances may alter considerably when Lionel gets more settled at home, and Lord Beauport has had time to get over the irritation which his return occasioned him."

"He resents your having left us more bitterly than any thing, Annie. He constantly speaks of you in the highest terms of praise, and wishes you back with us. And so do I, my dear, so do I."

Annie was amazed. Tears were in Lady Beauport's eyes, and a tremble in her voice. During all the period of Annie's residence in her house, the Countess had never shown so much feeling towards her, had never suffered her to feel herself of so much importance. The sterling merit of the girl, her self-denial, her companionable qualities, had never before met with so much recognition; and a thrill of gratification passed through her as she felt that she was missed and valued in the home whence Lionel's conduct had driven her.

"I am very glad," she said, "that Lord Beau-

port thinks and speaks so kindly of me — indeed, he was always kind to me, and I am very grateful to him and you."

"Then why will you not come to us, Annie? Why do you prefer these new friends to us?"

"I do not," she answered; "but as things have been, as they are, it is better I should not be in a position possibly to estrange the father and son still more. If I were in the house, it would only furnish him with an excuse to remain away, and cause Lord Beauport additional anxiety."

Annie knew that she must appear strangely obstinate to Lady Beauport; but it could not be helped; it was impossible that she could explain. The visit of the Countess was a long one; and Annie gathered from her further confidences that her dissatisfaction with Lionel was not her only trouble. The future was not bright before Lady Beauport. The charms of the world were fading in her estimation; society was losing its allurements, not under the chastening of a wholesome grief, but under the corroding, disenchanting influence of bitterness and disappointment. She looked aged and wearied; and before she and Annie parted that day, she had acknowledged to the girl that she dreaded the prospect before her, and had no confidence in her only son, or in his line of conduct towards her in the event of Lord Beauport's death. The Earl's words to his wife had been prophetic, — in Caterham's death there had been but the beginning of sorrow.

Annie stood sadly at the house-door, and watched the carriage as it rolled away and bore Lady Beauport out of her sight, as it bears her out of this history.

"This is the man," she thought, "whom she would have remorselessly made me marry, and been insensible to the cruel wrong she would have done to me. What a wonderful thing is that boundless, blind egotism of mothers! In one breath she confesses that he makes her miserable, and admits his contemptible, wretched nature, though she knows little of its real evil; in the next she complains that I did not tie myself to the miserable destiny of being his wife!"

Then Annie turned into the drawing-room, and went over to the window, through whose panes Margaret's wistful, weary gaze had been so often and so long directed. She leaned one round fair arm against the glass, and laid her sleek brown head upon it, musingly:

"I wonder when *home* will really come for me," she thought. "I wonder where I shall go to, and what I shall do, when I must leave this. I wonder if little Arthur will miss me very much when I go away, after Geoffrey comes back."

Geoffrey Ludlow's letters to his mother and sister were neither numerous nor voluminous, but they were explicit; and the anxious hearts at home gradually began to feel more at rest about the absent one so dear to them all. He had written with much kindness and sympathy on the occasion of Til's marriage, and they had all felt what a testimony to his unselfish nature and his generous heart his letter was. With what pangs of memory, — what keen revivals of vain longing love and cruel grief for the beautiful woman who had gone down into her grave with the full ardour of his passionate de-

votion still clinging around her, — what desperate struggles against the weariness of spirit which made every thing a burden to him, — Geoffrey had written the warm frank letter over which Til had cried, and Charley had glowed with pleasure, the recipients never knew. There was one who guessed them, — one who seemed to herself intuitively to realise them all, to weigh and measure every movement of the strong heart which had so much ado to keep itself from breaking, far away in the distant countries, until time should have had sufficient space in which to work its inevitable cure. Mrs. Potts showed her brother's letter to Annie Maurice with infinite delight, on that memorable day when she made her first visit, as a married woman, to Elm Lodge. The flutter and excitement of so special an occasion makes itself felt amid all the other flutters and excitements of that period which is the great epoch in a woman's life. The delights of "a home of one's own" are never so truly realised as when the bride returns, as a guest, to the home she has left for ever as an inmate. It may be much more luxurious, much more important, much more wealthy; but it is not hers, and, above all, it is not "his;" and the little sense of strangeness is felt to be an exquisite and a new pleasure. Til was just the sort of girl to feel this to the fullest, though her "own" house was actually her "old" home, and she had never been a resident at Elm Lodge: but the house at Brompton had a thousand charms now which Til had never found in it before, and on which she expatiated eagerly to Mrs. Ludlow, while Annie Maurice was reading Geoffrey's letter. She was

very pale when she handed it back to Til, and there were large tears standing in her full brown eyes.

"Isn't it a delightful letter, Annie?" asked Mrs. Potts; "so kind and genial; so exactly like dear old Geoff."

"Yes," Annie replied, very softly; "it is indeed, Til; it is very like Geoffrey."

Then Annie went to look after little Arthur, and left the mother and daughter to their delightful confidential talk.

When the party from Elm Lodge were at the seaside, after Til's marriage, Annie began to write pretty regularly to Geoffrey, who was then in Egypt. She was always thinking of him, and of how his mind was to be roused from its grief, and once more interested in life. She felt that he was labouring at his art for money, and because he desired to secure the future of those dear to him, in the sense of duty, but that for him the fame which he was rapidly winning was very little worth, and the glory was quite gone out of life, — gone down, with the golden hair and the violet eyes, into the dust which was lying upon them. Annie, who had never known a similar grief, understood his in all its intricacies of suffering, with the intuitive comprehension of the heart, which happily stands many a woman instead of intellectual gifts and the learning of experience; and knowing this, the girl, whose unselfish spirit read the heart of her early friend, but never questioned her own, sought with all her simple and earnest zeal how to "cure him of his cruel wound." His picture had been one of the gems of the Academy, one of the great successes of the year,

and Annie had written to him enthusiastically about it, as his mother had also done; but she counted nothing upon this. Geoffrey was wearily pleased that they were pleased and gratified, but that was all. His hand did its work, but the soul was not there; and as he was now working amid the ruins of a dead world, and a nation passed away in the early youth of time, his mood was congenial to it, and he grew to like the select lapse of the sultry desert life, and to rebel less and less against his fate, in the distant land where every thing was strange, and there was no fear of a touch upon the torturing nerves of association. All this Annie Maurice divined, and turned constantly in her mind; and amidst the numerous duties to which she devoted herself with the quiet steadiness which was one of her strongest characteristics, she thought incessantly of Geoffrey, and of how the cloud was to be lifted from him. Her life was a busy one, for all the real cares of the household rested upon her. Mrs. Ludlow had been an admirable manager of her own house, and in her own sphere, but she did not understand the scale on which Elm Lodge had been maintained even in Margaret's time, and that which Miss Maurice established was altogether beyond her reach. The old lady was very happy; that was quite evident. She and Annie agreed admirably. The younger lady studied her peculiarities with the utmost care and forbearance, and the "cross" sat slightly now. She was growing old; and what she did not see she had lost the faculty of grieving for; and Geoffrey was well, and winning fame and money. It seemed a long time ago now since she

had regarded her daughter-in-law's furniture and dress with envy, and speculated upon the remote possibility of some day driving in her son's carriage.

Mrs. Ludlow had a carriage always at her service now, and the most cheerful of companions in her daily drive; for she, Annie, and the child made country excursions every afternoon, and the only time the girl kept for her exclusive enjoyment was that devoted to her early-morning rides. Some of the earliest among the loungers by the sad sea-waves grew accustomed to observe, with a sense of admiration and pleasure, the fresh fair face of Annie Maurice, as, flushed with exercise and blooming like a rose in the morning air, she would dismount at the door of her "marine villa," where a wee toddling child always awaited her coming, who was immediately lifted to her saddle, and indulged with a few gentle pacings up and down before the windows, whence an old lady would watch the group with grave delight. Mrs. Ludlow wrote all these and many more particulars of her happy life to her absent son; and sometimes Annie wondered whether those cheerful garrulous letters, in which the unconscious mother showed Geoffrey so plainly how little she realised his state of mind, increased his sense of loneliness. Then she bethought her of writing to Geoffrey constantly about the child. She knew how he had loved the baby in happier times, and she never wronged the heart she knew so well by a suspicion that the disgrace and calamity which had befallen him had changed this deep-dwelling sentiment, or included the motherless child in its fatal gloom. She had not spoken of little Arthur

in her earlier letters more than cursorily, assuring his father that the child was well and thriving; but now that time was going over, and the little boy's intellect was unfolding, she caught at the legitimate source of interest for Geoffrey, and consulted him eagerly and continuously about her little protégé and pupil.

The autumn passed and the winter came; and Mrs. Ludlow, her grandchild, and Annie Maurice were settled at Elm Lodge. Annie had taken anew to her painting, and Geoffrey's deserted studio had again an inmate. Hither would come Charley Potts — a genial gentleman still, but with much added steadiness and scrupulously-neat attire. The wholesome subjugation of a happy marriage was agreeing wonderfully with Charley, and his faith in Til was perfectly unbounded. He was a model of punctuality now; and when he "did a turn" for Annie in the painting-room, he brushed his coat before encountering the unartistic world outside with a cheerful scrupulousness, at which, in the days of Caroline and the beer-signals, he would have derisively mocked. Another visitor was not infrequent there, though he had needed much coaxing to induce him to come, and had winced from the sight of Geoff's ghostly easel on his first visit with keen and perceptible pain.

A strong mutual liking existed between William Bowker and Annie Maurice. Each had recognised the sterling value of the other on the memorable occasion of their first meeting; and the rough exterior of Bowker being less perceptible then than under ordinary circumstances, it had never jarred with Annie's taste or offended against her sensibilities.

So it came to pass that these two incongruous persons became great friends; and William Bowker — always a gentleman in the presence of any woman in whom he recognised the soul of a lady — passed many hours such as he had never thought life could again give him in his dear old friend's deserted home. Miss Maurice had no inadequate idea of the social duties which her wealth imposed upon her, and she discharged them with the conscientiousness which lent her character its combined firmness and sweetness. But all her delight was in her adopted home, and in the child, for whom she thought and planned with almost maternal foresight and quite maternal affection. William Bowker also delighted in the boy, and would have expended an altogether unreasonable portion of his slender substance upon indigestible eatables and curiously-ingenious and destructible toys but for Annie's prohibition, to which he yielded loyal obedience. Many a talk had the strangely-assorted pair of friends as they watched the child's play; and they generally ran on Geoffrey, or if they rambled off from him for a while, returned to him through strange and tortuous ways. Not one of Geoff's friends forgot him, or ceased to miss him, and to wish him back among them. Not one of "the boys" but had grieved in his simple uncultivated way over the only half-understood domestic calamity which had fallen upon "old Geoff;" but time has passed, and they had begun to talk more of his pictures and less of himself. It was otherwise with Bowker, whose actual associates were few, though his spirit of *camaraderie* was unbounded. He had always loved Geoffrey Ludlow with a peculiar

affection, in which there had been an unexplained foreboding; and its full and terrible realisation had been a great epoch in the life of William Bowker. It had broken up the sealed fountains of feeling; it had driven him away from the grave of the past; it had brought his strong sympathies and strong sense into action, and had effected a moral revolution in the lonely man, who had been soured by trouble only in appearance, but in whom the pure sweet springs of the life of the heart still existed. Now he began to weary for Geoffrey. He dreaded to see his friend sinking into the listlessness and dreariness which had wasted his own life; and Geoffrey's material prosperity, strongly as it contrasted with the poverty and neglect which had been his own lot, did not enter into Bowker's calculations with any reassuring effect.

"Does Geoffrey never fix any time for his return?" asked William Bowker of Miss Maurice one summer evening when they were slowly pacing about the lawn at Elm Lodge, after the important ceremonial of little Arthur's *coucher* had been performed.

"No," said Annie with a quick and painful blush.

"I wish he would, then," said Bowker. "He has been away quite long enough now; and he ought to come home and face his duties like a man, and thank God that he has a home, and duties which don't all centre in himself. If they did, the less he observed them the better." This with a touch of the old bitterness, rarely apparent now. Annie did not answer, and Bowker went on:

"His mother wants him, his child wants him; and for that matter Mrs. Potts's child wants him too.

Charley talks some nonsense about waiting to baptise the little girl until Geoff comes home 'with water from the Jordan,' said Master Charley, being uncertain in his geography, and having some confused notion about some sacred river. However, if we could only get him home, he might bottle a little of the Nile for us instead. I really wish he'd come. I want to know how far he has really lived down his trouble; I can't bear to think that it may conquer and spoil him."

"It has not done that; it won't do that — no fear of it," said Annie eagerly; "I can tell from his letters that Geoffrey is a strong man again, — stronger than he has ever been before."

"He needs to be, Miss Maurice," said William, with a short, kind, sounding laugh, "for Geoffrey's nature is not strong. I don't think I ever knew a weaker man but one —"

He paused, but Annie made no remark. Presently he fell to talking of the child and his likeness to Geoffrey, which was very strong and very striking.

"There is not a trace of the poor mother in him," said Bowker; "I am glad of it. The less there is before Geoffrey's eyes when he returns to remind him of the past the better."

"And yet," said Annie in a low voice, and with something troubled in her manner, "I have often thought if he returned, and I saw his meeting with the child, how dreadful it would be to watch him looking for a trace of the dead in little Arthur's face, and not finding it, to know that he felt the world doubly empty."

Her face was half averted from Bowker as she spoke, and he looked at her curiously and long. He

marked the sudden flush and pallor of her cheek, and the hurry in her words; and a bright unusual light came into William Bowker's eyes. He only said,

"Ay — that would indeed be a pang the more."

And a few minutes later he took his leave.

"Charley," said Mr. Bowker to Mr. Potts, three or four days afterwards, as he stood before that gentleman's easel, criticising the performance upon it with his accustomed science and freedom, "why don't you get your wife to write to Geoffrey, and make him come home? He ought to come, you know, and it's not for you or me to remonstrate with him. Women do these things better than men; they can handle sores without hurting them, and pull at heart-strings without making them crack. There's his mother, growing old, you know; and wanting to see him; and the child's a fine young shaver now, and his father ought to know something of him, eh, Charley, what do you think?"

"You're about right, old fellow, that's what I think. Til often talks about it, particularly since the baby was born, and wonders how Geoffrey can stay away; but I suppose if his own child won't bring him home, ours can't be expected to do it; eh, William? Til doesn't think of that, you see."

"I see," said Mr. Bowker, with a smile. "But, Charley, do you just get Til to write to Geoffrey, and tell him his mother is not as strong as she used to be, and that the care of her and the child is rather too much of a responsibility to rest upon Miss Maurice's shoulders, and I think Geoffrey will see the matter in the true light, and come home at once.'

Charley promised to obey Mr. Bowker's injunction, premising that he must first "talk it over with Til." William made no objection to this perfectly proper arrangement, and felt no uneasiness respecting the result of the conjugal discussion. He walked away smiling, congratulating himself on having done "rather a deep thing," and full of visions in which Geoffrey played a part which would have considerably astonished him, had its nature been revealed to him.

Six weeks after the conversation between Mr. Bowker and Mr. Potts, a foreign letter in Geoffrey's hand reached Mrs. Ludlow. She hardly gave herself time to read it through, before she sought to impart its tidings to Annie. The young lady was not in the painting-room, not in the drawing-room, not in the house. The footman thought he had seen her on the lawn with the child, going towards the swing. Thither Mrs. Ludlow proceeded, and there she found Annie; her hat flung off, her brown hair falling about her shoulders, and her graceful arms extended to their full length as she swung the delighted child, who shouted "higher, higher!" after the fashion of children.

"Geoffrey's coming home, Annie!" said Mrs. Ludlow, as soon as she reached the side of the almost breathless girl. "He's coming home immediately, — by the next mail. Is not that good news?"

The rope had dropped from Annie's hand at the first sentence. Now she stooped, picked up her hat, and put it on; and turning to lift the child from his seat, she said,

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Ludlow, it is; but very sudden. Has any thing happened?"

"Nothing whatever, my dear. Geoffrey only says — stay, here's his letter; read for yourself. He merely says he feels it is time to come home; he has got all the good out of his captivity in Egypt in every way that he is likely to get — though why he should call it captivity when he went there of his own accord, and could have come away at any moment he liked, is more than I can understand. Well, well, Geoffrey always had queer sayings; but what matter, now that he is coming home! — Papa is coming home, Arty; — we shall see him soon."

"Shall we?" said the child. "Let me go, Annie; you are making my hand cold with yours;" and he slipped his little hand from her grasp, and ran on to the house, where he imparted the news to the household with an air of vast importance.

"Annie," said Geoffrey Ludlow one day when he had been about three weeks at home, and after he had passed some time in examining Miss Maurice's art-performances, "what has become of the drawing I once made of you, long ago, when you were a little girl? Don't you remember you laughed at it, and said, 'Grandmamma, grandmamma, what big eyes you've got!' to it? and the dear old Rector was so dreadfully frightened lest I should be offended."

"Yes, I remember," answered Annie; "and I have the picture. Why?"

"Because I want it, Annie. If you will let me have it, I will paint a full-length portrait of you for the next Academy, in which every one shall recognise a striking likeness of the beautiful and accomplished Miss Maurice."

"Don't, Geoffrey," said Annie gravely. "I am not in the least more beautiful now than I was when you took my likeness long ago; but you shall have the drawing, and you shall paint the picture, and it shall belong to Arthur, to remind him of me when I am gone abroad."

"Gone abroad!" said Geoffrey, starting up from his chair and approaching her. "You—gone abroad!"

"Yes," she said, with a very faint smile. "Is no one to see men and cities, and sand and sphinxes, and mummies and Nile boatmen, except yourself? Don't you remember how Caterham always wished me to travel and improve my mind?"

"I remember," said Geoff moodily; "but I don't think your mind wants improving, Annie. How selfish I am! I really had a kind of fancy that this was your home; different as it is from such as you might, as you may command, it was your own choice once. You see what creatures we men are. A woman like you sacrifices herself for one of us, to do him good in his adversity, and he takes it as a matter of course that the sacrifice is to continue—" Geoffrey turned to the window, and looked wearily out. From the dim corner in which she sat, Annie looked timidly at his tall figure — a true image of manliness and vigour. She could see the bronzed cheek, the full rich brown eye, the bushy beard with its mingled lines of brown and gray. There was far more strength in the face than in former days, and far more refinement, a deeper tenderness, and a loftier meaning. She thought so as she looked at him, and her heart beat hard and fast.

"It was no sacrifice to me, Geoffrey," she said

in a very low tone. "You know I could not bear the life I was leading. I have been very happy here. Every one has been very good to me, and I have been very happy; but—"

Geoffrey turned abruptly, and looked at her — looked at the graceful head, the blushing cheek, the faltering lips — and went straight up to her. She shrunk just a little at his approach; but when he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and bent his head down towards hers, she raised her sweet candid face and looked at him.

"Annie," he said eagerly, with the quick earnestness of a man whose soul is in his words, "will you forgive all my mistakes, — I have found them out now,—and take the truest love that ever a man offered to the most perfect of women? Annie, can you love me? — will you stay with me? My darling, say yes!"

His strong arms were round her now, and her sleek brown head lay upon his breast. She raised it to look at him; then folded her hands and laid them upon his shoulder, and with her crystal-clear eyes uplifted, said, "I will stay with you, Geoffrey. I have always loved you."

The storm had blown itself out now — its last mutterings had died away; and through all its fury and despair, through all its rude buffets and threatening of doom, Geoffrey Ludlow had reached LAND AT LAST!

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek
MÜNCHEN

BSB Bayerische StaatsBibliothek

MDZ Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum Digitale Bibliothek

Yates, Edmund Hodgson

Land at last a novel

Bd.: 2

Leipzig 1866

P.o.angl. 474 d-1/2
urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10750993-9